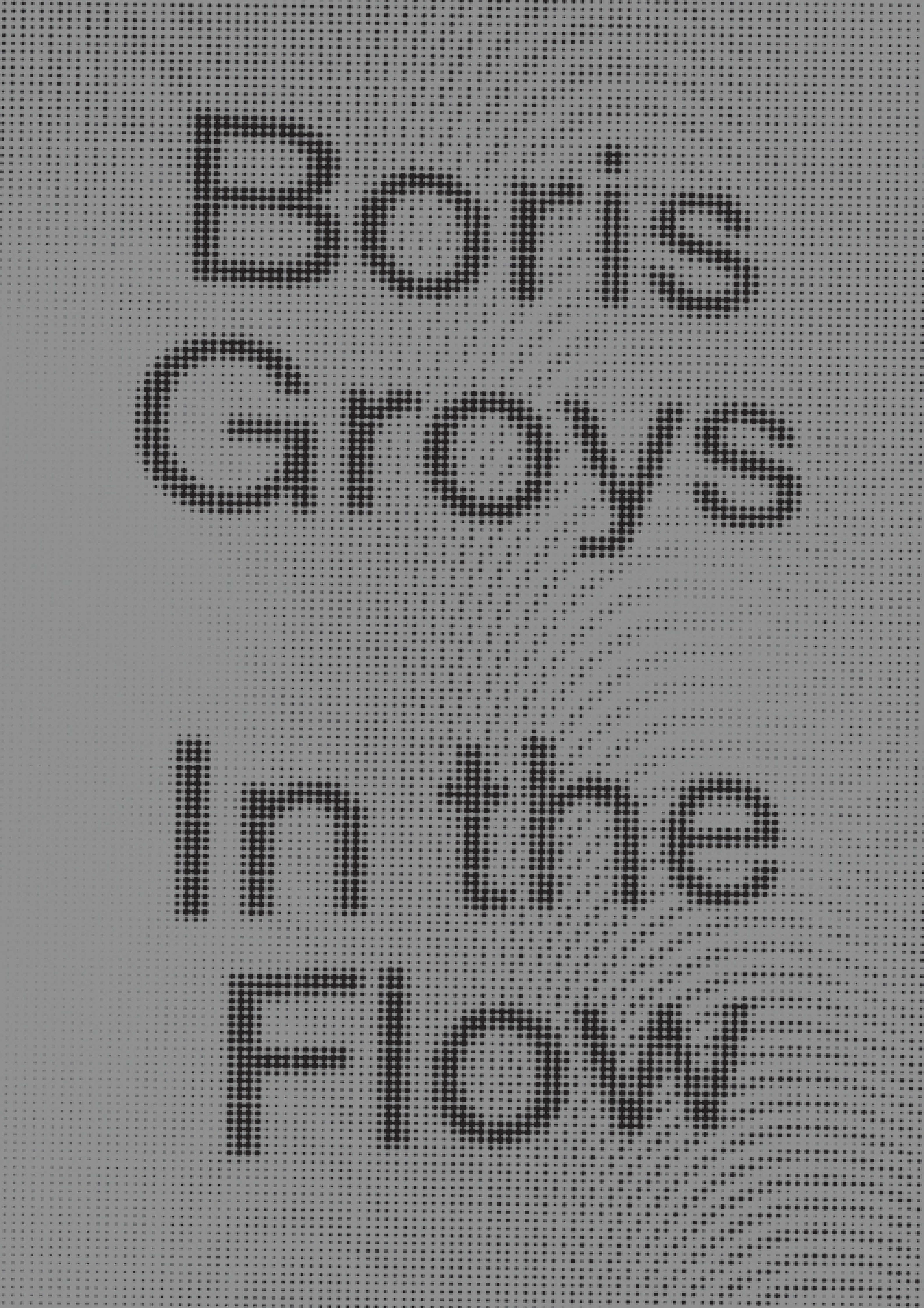

Boris
Groys

In the
Flow

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BY

BORIS GROYS

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INTRODUCTION

The Rheology of Art

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the artists and writers of the avant-garde started a campaign against art museums and generally against the preservation of the art of the past. They asked a simple question: Why are certain things privileged, why does society care about them and invest money in their conservation and restoration, while other things are delivered to the destructive power of time and nobody cares about their eventual dissolution and disappearance? The traditional answers to this question were no longer considered satisfactory. Thus, Marinetti proclaimed that the antique Greek statues are not more beautiful than a modern car or airplane. Yet one lets cars and airplanes perish and keeps the statues intact. It seems that we consider the past as more valuable than the present, but this is unjust and even absurd, because we live in the present and not in the past. Can we say that our own value is lower than the value of the people who lived before us? The avant-garde polemic against the institution of the museum was driven by the same egalitarian and democratic impulse as modern politics. It asserted the equality of things, spaces and, even more importantly, times, in analogy to the equality of men.

Now the equality of things and times can be realized in two different ways: by extending the museum privilege to all things, including all present things, or by abolishing it completely. Duchamp's ready-made practice was an attempt in the first direction. However, this path did not take him far enough. The democratized museum could not include everything: Even if a limited number of urinals got a privileged place in some art museums, their numerous brethren were left in their usual non-privileged places – in toilets all around the world. So only the second path remained. But to give up the museum privilege means to deliver all the things, including artworks, up to the flow of time. And thus the next question emerges: Can we still speak about art if the fate of artworks is no different from the fate of all other, ordinary things? Here I should stress the following point. Speaking about art entering the flow of time, I do not mean that art began to depict this flow – as the old Chinese art did. Rather, I mean that art as such became fluid. There is a science that investigates all kinds of fluids and fluidity in general. It is called rheology. What I attempt in this book is the rheology of art – discussion of art as flowing.

The modern and contemporary understanding of art as fluid seems to contradict art's original purpose: to withstand the flow of time. Indeed, in the context of early modernity, art functioned as a secular, materialist substitute for the lost belief in the eternal ideas and the divine spirit. Contemplation of works of art took the place of the contemplation of the Platonic ideal or of God. Through art, modern men had a chance to abandon, at least for a moment, the flow of *vita activa* and dedicate some time to the contemplation of images that had been contemplated by generations of men before their birth and would be contemplated by future generations after their death. The museum promised a materialist eternity secured not ontologically but rather politically and economically. In the twentieth century, this promise became problematic. Political and economic upheavals, wars and revolutions showed that this promise was hollow. The institution of the museum could never achieve a truly secure economic foundation and so it sought the backing of a stable political will. The museum, even if the desire for equality had not motivated the artistic avant-garde to start their struggle against it, could not be immunized against the power of time. The contemporary museum system is proof of it. That does not mean that museums have disappeared – on the contrary, the number of them has been growing all over the world. Rather, it means that the museums themselves became immersed in the flow of time. The museum ceased to be a place for a permanent collection and became a stage for changing curatorial projects, guided tours, screenings, lectures, performances, etc. In our time, artworks permanently circulate from one exhibition to another, from one collection to another. And that means that they are getting more and more involved in the flow of time. Returning to the aesthetic contemplation of the same image means not only returning to the same object but also returning to the same context of contemplation: especially in our age, we have become keenly aware of the dependency of the artwork on its context. Thus, whatever else can be said about the contemporary museum, it has ceased to be a place of contemplation and meditation. But does this mean that by abandoning the goal of repeated contemplation of the same image, art has also abandoned its project to escape the prison of the present? I would argue that it is not the case.

Indeed, contemporary art escapes the present not by resisting the flow of time but by collaborating with it. If all present things are transitory and in flux, it is possible and even necessary to anticipate their eventual disappearance. Modern and contemporary art practices precisely the prefiguration and imitation of the future in which things now contemporary will disappear. Such an imitation of the future cannot produce artworks. Rather, it produces artistic events, performances, temporary exhibitions that demonstrate the transitory character of the present order of things and the rules that govern contemporary social behaviour. Imitation of the anticipated future can manifest itself only as an event and not as a thing. The artists of Futurism and Dada produced artistic events revealing the decay and obsoleteness of the present. But the production of art events is even more characteristic of contemporary art, with its culture of performance and participation. Today’s artistic events cannot be preserved and contemplated like traditional artworks. However, they can be documented, ‘covered’, narrated and commented on. Traditional art produced art objects. Contemporary art produces information about art events.

That makes contemporary art compatible with the Internet – and chapters in this book discuss the relationship between art and the Internet. Indeed, the traditional archives functioned in the following way: Certain objects (documents, artworks, etc.) were taken out of the material flow, secured and put under protection. Walter Benjamin famously described the effect of this operation as the loss of aura. Being taken out of the material flow, the object became a copy of itself – contemplated beyond its original inscription in the ‘here and now' of the material flow. A museum piece is an object minus its (invisible) aura of originality (originality being understood as the original placing of the object in space and time). Digital archiving, on the contrary, ignores the object and preserves the aura. The object itself is absent. What remains is its metadata – the information about the here and now of its original inscription into the material flow: photos, videos, textual testimonies. The museum object always needed the interpretation that substituted for its lost aura. Digital metadata creates an aura without an object. That is why the adequate reaction to this metadata is the reenactment of the documented event – an attempt to fill out the emptiness in the middle of the aura.

These two ways of archiving – archiving of the object without an aura and of the aura without an object – are, of course, not new. Let us consider two famous philosophers of Greek antiquity: Plato and Diogenes. Plato produced a lot of texts that we are required to interpret. Diogenes undertook some philosophical performances that we are able to re-enact. Or let us consider the difference between Thomas of Aquinas and Francis of Assisi. The first wrote many texts – the other took his clothes off and went naked to seek God. We are confronted here with the performances of revolt against the conventions of the present – the performances that were considered belonging to philosophy in antiquity, to religion in the Middle Ages, and to modern and contemporary art in our times. On the one hand we have texts and images – on the other hand legends and hearsay. For a very long time texts and images were more reliable media than legends and hearsay. Today the relationship between them has changed. There are no libraries and museums that could compete with the Internet – and the Internet is precisely the place where legends and hearsay proliferate. Today, if one wants to be up-to-date, one should not paint a painting or write a book, but instead re-enact Diogenes: arm oneself with a lamp in broad daylight and go in search of the reader and spectator.

Of course, many contemporary artists still produce artworks. Often enough they produce them using digital technologies of different kinds. These artworks can still be displayed in museums or art exhibitions. There are also specialized Web sites where one can see digital copies of analogue artworks or digital images created specifically to be shown on the sites. The traditional art system remains in place and the production of artworks goes on. The only problem is that this system is becoming increasingly marginalized. The artworks that circulate as commodities in our contemporary art market address predominantly the possible buyers – a wealthy and influential but relatively small stratum of society. These artworks function as luxury goods – not accidentally, private museums were recently built by Louis Vuitton and Prada. Specialized art Web sites also have a limited audience. On the other hand, the Internet has become a powerful medium for spreading information and documentation. Earlier, art events, performances and happenings were poorly documented and accessible only to the art insider. Today, the documentation of art can reach a much bigger audience than an artwork can. (Let us remember such different but comparable phenomena as Marina Abramovic's performance at New York City's Museum of Modern Art, and Pussy Riot's performance in Christ the Saviour Cathedral in Moscow.) In other words, today's art in flux is better documented than ever before, and the documentation is better preserved and distributed than traditional artworks.

Here it is important to avoid a widespread misunderstanding. One often speaks about information 'flowing' through the Internet. However, this flow of information is essentially different from the material flow discussed above. The material flow is irreversible. Time cannot flow backwards. Being immersed in the flow of things, one cannot return to previous moments in time or experience the events of the past. The only possibility of return presupposes the existence of eternal ideas or God – or their substitution by the 'material', profane eternity of art museums. If the existence of eternal essences is denied and art institutions collapse, there remains no way out of the material flow – and thus also no way back, no possibility of return. The Internet is founded, though, precisely on the possibility of return. Every operation on the Internet can be retraced, and information can be recovered and reproduced. Of course, the

Internet is also material through and through. Its hardware and software are subject to aging and to the power of entropy. It is easy to imagine the dissolution and disappearance of the Internet in its totality. But as long as the Internet exists and functions it will allow us to return to the same information – as earlier the nondigital archives and museums allowed us to return to the same objects. In other words, the Internet is not a flow but a reversal of the flow.

That means that the Internet allows us much easier access to the documentation of previous art events than any other archive. Every art event imitates the future demise and disappearance of the contemporary order of life. When I speak about imitation of the future, I do not mean, of course, the 'visionary' description of imagined new things in the sci-fi mode. Art does not predict the future, but rather demonstrates the transitory character of the present – and thus opens the way for the new. Art in the flow engenders its own tradition, the re-enactment of an art event as anticipation and realization of a new beginning, of a future in which the orders that define our present will lose their power and disappear. And because for the thinking of the flow all times are equal, such a re-enactment can be realized at every moment.

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CHAPTER 1

Entering the Flow

Traditionally, the main occupation of human culture was the search for totality. This search was dictated by the desire of human subjects to overcome their own particularity, to get rid of the specific ‘points of view’ that were defined by their ‘life forms’ and to gain access to a general, universal worldview that would be valid everywhere and at every time. This desire to transcend one’s own particularity does not necessarily have its origin in the ontological constitution of the subject itself. We know that the particular is always subsumed, subjected to the whole. So the desire for totality is simply the desire for freedom. And this desire, again, does not need to be interpreted as being somehow inherent in human nature. We know the historical examples of self-liberation in the name of totality, and we are able to imitate these examples – as we may imitate any other form of life.

Thus, we hear and read the myths that describe the emergence of the world, its functioning and its unavoidable end. In these myths we meet gods and demigods, prophets and heroes. But we also read the philosophical and scientific treatises that describe the world according to the principles of reason. In these texts we meet the transcendental subject, the unconscious, the absolute spirit and many other similar things. Now, all these narratives and discourses presuppose an ability in the human mind to arise above the level of its material existence and find access to God or universal reason – to overcome its own finiteness, its mortality. Access to totality is the same as access to immortality.

However, during the period of modernity we got accustomed to the view that human beings are incurably mortal, finite, and therefore irreparably determined by the specific material conditions of their existence. Humans cannot escape these conditions even in a flight of imagination, because every such flight always takes the reality of their existence as a starting point. In other words, the materialist understanding of the world seems to deny human beings access to the totality of the world that was secured to them by religious and philosophical tradition. According to this view, we are merely able to improve the material conditions of our existence – but we cannot overcome them. We can find a better position inside the whole of the world – but not the central position that would allow us to view/overlook the totality of the world. This understanding of materialism has certain cultural, economic and political implications that I do not want to go into at the moment. Rather, I would like to ask the following question: Is this understanding correct, truly materialist?

Now I would suggest that it is not. The materialist discourse, as initially developed by Marx and Nietzsche, describes the world in permanent movement, in the flow – be it the dynamics of productive forces or the Dionysian impulse. According to this materialist tradition, all things are finite – but all of them are involved in the infinite material flow. So there is the materialist totality – the totality of the flow. Then the question becomes, Is it possible for a human being to enter the flow in order to get access to its totality? On a certain very banal level, the answer is, of course, yes. Human beings are things among other things in the world, and thus they are subjected to the same universal flow. They become ill, they grow old, and they die. Human bodies are always in the flow. The old-fashioned, metaphysical universality could be achieved only through very special and complicated efforts. Materialist universality seems to be always already there – achievable without any effort and without any price. Indeed, we need not make any effort to be born or to die, or, generally, to go with the flow. Materialist totality, the totality of the flow, can be thus understood as a purely negative totality: Reaching this totality simply means rejecting all attempts to escape into the fictive, metaphysical, spiritual space beyond the material world, abandoning all dreams of immortality, eternal truth, moral perfection, ideal beauty, etc.

However, even if human bodies are subject to aging, death, and dissolution in the flow of material processes, it does not mean that human beings are also in flux. One can be born, live, and die under the same name, having the same citizenship, the same CV and the same Web site, remaining the same person. Our bodies are not the only material supports of our being persons. From the moment of our birth we are inscribed into certain social orders – without our consent or even knowledge of that fact. The material supports of our persons are state archives, medical records, passwords to certain Internet sites, and other documentation. Of course, these archives will be also destroyed by the material flow at some point in time. But this destruction takes time that is not commensurable with our lifetime. Our personality survives our body – preventing our immediate access to the totality of the flow. To destroy, or at least transform, the archives that materially support our persons during our lifetime, we need to initiate a revolution. The revolution is an artificial acceleration of the world flow. It is an effect of impatience or unwillingness to wait until the existing order collapses by itself and liberates a human being from his or her personality. That is why revolutionary practice is the only way by which post-metaphysical, materialist man can find an access to the totality of the flow. However, such a revolutionary practice presupposes serious efforts on the part of the practitioner, and requires intelligence and discipline comparable to what was needed to achieve spiritual totality.

These revolutionary efforts at self-fluidization, understood as the dissolution of one’s own person, of one’s own public image, are documented by modern and contemporary art, just as efforts at self-eternalization were documented by traditional art. The artworks, considered as specific material objects – as art bodies, so to speak – are perishable. But when considered as publicly accessible, visible forms, they are not. As an artwork’s existing material support decays and dissolves, the work can be copied and placed on a different material support – for example, as a digitalized image accessible on the Internet. The history of art demonstrates this replacing of old supports by new ones – for example, in our efforts at restoration and reconstruction. Thus, the individual form of an artwork as far as it is inscribed in the archives of art history remains intact – unaffected or only marginally affected by material flux. To get access to the flow, the form must be made fluid – it cannot become fluid by itself. And that is the reason for modern artistic revolutions. The fluidization of the artistic form is the means by which modern and contemporary art tries to gain access to the totality of the world. However, such fluidization does not come by itself – again, it requires an additional effort. Now, I would like to discuss some examples of the artistic practices of fluidization and self-fluidization – and to indicate some conditions and limitations of these practices.

Let us begin by short consideration of Wagner's notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Wagner introduced this notion in his programmatic treatise 'The Artwork of the Future' (1849–1950), which he wrote while living in exile in Zurich, after the end of the revolutionary uprisings in Germany in 1848. In it, Wagner develops the project of an artwork (of the future) that is heavily influenced by the materialist philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach. Right at the beginning of his treatise, Wagner states that the typical artist of his time is an egoist who is completely isolated from the life of the people and practices his art for the luxury of the rich; in so doing, he exclusively follows the dictates of fashion. The artist of the future must become radically different:

> He now can only will the universal, true, and unconditional; he yields himself not to a love for this or that particular object, but to wide *Love* itself. Thus does the egoist become a communist, the unit all, the man God, the art-variety Art.[1]

Thus, becoming a communist is possible only through self-renunciation, self-dissolution in the collective. Wagner writes:

> The last, completest renunciation (*Entäusserung*) of his personal egoism, the demonstration of his full ascent into universalism, a man can only show us by his *Death*; and that not by his accidental, but by his *necessary* death, the logical sequel to his actions, the last fulfilment of his being. *The celebration of such a death is the noblest thing that men can enter on*.[2]

The individual must die in order to establish the communist society. Admittedly, there remains a difference between the hero who sacrifices himself in life and the performer who makes this sacrifice onstage – the Gesamtkunstwerk being understood by Wagner as a music drama. Nonetheless, Wagner insists that this difference is suspended, for the performer

> does not merely *represent* in the artwork the action of the fêted hero, but also *repeats* its moral lesson; insomuch as he proves by this surrender of his personality that he also, in his artistic action, is obeying a dictate of Necessity which consumes the whole individuality of his being.[3]

The performer dissolves his or her artistic individuality in the whole of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as the hero sacrifices his life for the Communist future. Wagner called the *Gesamtkunstwerk* the 'Great United Art-work, which must gather up each branch of art, both to use as a means and, in some sense, to undo it for the common aim of *all*'. Here not only does the individual dissolve him- or herself in the social whole, but also the individual artistic contributions and particular artistic mediums lose their identities and dissolve themselves in the materiality of the whole.

Nevertheless, according to Wagner, the performer of the role of the main hero controls the whole staging of his self-demise, his descent into the material world – a descent that is represented by the symbolic death of the hero on the stage. All other performers and coworkers achieve their own artistic significance solely through participation in this ritual of self-sacrifice performed by the hero. Wagner speaks of the hero-performer as a dictator who mobilizes the collective of collaborators exclusively with the goal to stage his own sacrifice in the name of this collective. After the end of the sacrificial scene, the hero-performer is replaced by the next dictator. In other words, the hero (and, accordingly, his performer) controls his self-sacrifice from beginning to end. Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* shows us the descent of the hero into the material flow – but not the flow itself. Communism remains a remote ideal. Here, the event of descent into the formless materiality of the world becomes a form in itself – a form that can be repeated, restaged, re-enacted.

In Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* the individual voice of a singer remains identifiable – even if it is integrated into the whole of a music drama. Later, Hugo Ball dissolved the individual voice into the sound flow. Ball conceived the

Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich (where Wagner wrote the ‘Artwork of the Future’) as a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, being inspired by Wassily Kandinsky and his ‘abstract’ drama *Der gelbe Klang* (‘The Yellow Sound’). Ball wrote about Kandinsky: ‘He was concerned with the regeneration of society through the union of all artistic mediums and forces … It was inevitable that we should meet each other …’[4] In his diary, *Flight out of Time*, Ball writes, in the spring of 1916:

> The human organ represents the soul, the individuality in its wanderings with its demonic companions. The noises represent the background – the inarticulate, the disastrous, the decisive … In a typically compressed way, the poem shows the conflict of the *vox humana* with a world that threatens, ensnares, and destroys it, a world whose rhythm and noise are ineluctable.

About three months later, on 23 June 1916, Ball writes that he has invented ‘a new genre of poems – namely, *Lautgedichte* [‘sound poetry’]’. Sound poetry, as described by Ball, can be interpreted as the self-destruction of the traditional poem; as the exposure of the downfall and disappearance of the individual voice; as the descent of the human form into the totality of the material flow. Ball recalled of the public reading of his first sound poem at the Cabaret Voltaire: ‘Then the lights went out, as I had ordered, and bathed in sweat, I was carried off the stage like a magical bishop’. He experienced and described the reading of his work as an exhausting exposure of the human voice to the demonic forces of noise. Ball won this battle (becoming the magical bishop), but only by radically exposing himself to these demonic forces, allowing them to reduce his voice to pure noise, to senseless, purely material process.

The descent into material chaos is not presented here as a preliminary stage that announces an impending return to order, analogous to the periods of revolutionary chaos, social tumult, or carnival as they were described, for example, by Roger Caillois or Mikhail Bakhtin. In the terminology from Walter Benjamin’s ‘Essay on Violence,’ the violence of the material flow is divine and not mythical violence, insofar as the destruction of the old order does not lead to the emergence of a new order. But this divine violence is practised by an artist, not by God. There remains, therefore, merely a poem – having beginning and end, capable of being copied and repeated. We have a documentation of a descent into the flow – but not access to the flow itself. The same can be said about the later attempts of radical descent into material chaos – of fluidization of the artistic form and corresponding self-fluidization. I mean here Guy Debord's *dérive*, the artistic practice of *fluxus*, or texts and films – for example, films by Christoph Schlingensief – in which the personality of the hero or heroine becomes decentred, deconstructed, fluidized. All these texts and images show the limit that the artist necessarily reaches as he stages the descent of an artistic form into the flow. In the end, only the documentation of the descent into chaos and flow is produced – but the image of flow itself remains elusive.

Thus, it becomes clear that the descent of a subject into the material flow shares the fate of a subject's ascent to the contemplation of God or eternal ideas. The religious and philosophical tradition demonstrates repeated attempts to reach this contemplation, but it never presents their results in a convincing form. All religious illuminations and scientific proofs can be interpreted as products of our own imagination, which is determined by the material conditions of our existence. To the same degree and for the same reason, we cannot claim to have any evidence that we have ever entered the material flow. In this sense, that flow is as unreachable as eternal ideas. But at the same time, we have a collection of our attempts to enter the flow. The documentations of these attempts are added to the archive – the archive of self-fluidizations.

However, our art museums are no longer places of permanent collections and archives that would be able to stabilize at least these documentations of the flow. Instead, they have become places of temporary curatorial projects. Not accidentally, Harald Szeemann, who initiated the curatorial turn contemporary art has taken, was fascinated by the idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and in 1984 based an exhibition on it, 'Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk' ('The Tendency to Gesamtkunstwerk').[5] But what is the main difference between a curatorial project and a traditional exhibition? The traditional exhibition treats its space as anonymous and neutral. Only the exhibited artworks are important. Thus, artworks are perceived and treated as potentially immortal, even eternal, and the space they inhabit as contingent, accidental – merely a station where the immortal, self-identical artworks take a temporary rest from their wanderings through the material world. On the contrary, the installation – be it an artistic or curatorial installation – inscribes the exhibited artworks in this contingent material space. The curatorial project is a *Gesamtkunstwerk* because it instrumentalizes all the exhibited artworks, making them serve a common purpose that is formulated by the curator. At the same time, a curatorial or artistic installation is able to include all kinds of objects – some of them time-based artworks, or processes, some of them everyday objects, documentations, texts, and so forth. All of these elements, as well as the architecture of the space, its sound and light, lose their respective autonomy and begin to serve the creation of the whole, in which visitors and spectators are also included. Thus, ultimately, every curatorial project demonstrates its accidental, contingent, eventful, finite character – its own precariousness.

In fact, every curatorial project has the goal of contradicting the previous, traditional art-historical narratives. If such a contradiction does not take place, the curatorial project loses its legitimacy. An individually curated exhibition that merely reproduces and illustrates the already known narratives simply does not make any sense. For the same reason, each curatorial project should contradict the previous one. A new curator is a new dictator who erases the traces of the previous dictatorship. Thus, more and more contemporary museums are being transformed from spaces for permanent collections into stages for temporary curatorial projects – temporary *Gesamtkunstwerken*. And the main goal of these temporary curatorial dictatorships is to bring the art museum into the flow – to make art fluid, to synchronize it with the flow of time. Today, the museum ceases to be a space of contemplation but rather becomes a place where things happen. The contemporary museum stages not only curatorial projects but also lectures, conferences, readings, screenings, concerts, guided tours. The flow of events inside the museum is today often faster than the flow outside its walls. Meanwhile, we have got used to asking ourselves what is *going on* in this or that museum. And to find the relevant information, we search not only the Web site of the museum but also blogs, social media pages, Twitter, etc. We follow a museum's activities on the Internet more often than we visit the museum. On the Internet, the museum functions as a blog. Thus, today, the museum presents not a universal history of art but, rather, its own history, in the chain of events staged by the museum itself.

Nowadays one speaks often about the theatricalization of the museum. Indeed, in our age people come to exhibition openings in the same way they went to opera and theatre premieres in the past. This theatricalization of the museum is often criticized as a sign of the museum's involvement in the contemporary entertainment industry. However, there is a crucial difference between the installation space and the theatrical space. In the theatre, the spectators are positioned outside the stage; in the museum, they enter the stage, find themselves inside the spectacle. Thus, the contemporary museum realizes the modernist dream of a theatre in which there is no clear boundary between the stage and the space for the audience – a dream that the theatre itself was never able to fully realize. Although Wagner speaks of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as an event that erases the border between stage and audience, the Festspielhaus in Bayreuth, which was build under the Wagner's direction, not only did not erase this border but even radicalized it. The contemporary theatre, including Bayreuth, uses more and more art, especially contemporary art, on stage, but still does not erase the difference between stage and audience. The contemporary installation art it includes remains part of the traditional scenography. However, at an artistic or curatorial installation, the public is integrated into the context of the art – the installation space – and becomes a part of it.

Moreover, the traditional museum that was a place of things and not events can equally be accused of functioning as a part of the art market. This kind of criticism is pretty easy to formulate – and it is universal enough to be applied to any possible artistic strategy. But, as we know, the traditional museum not only displayed certain things and images but also opened them to analysis and theoretical reflection by providing a means of historical comparison. Modern art has not merely produced things and images but also analyzed the thingness of things and the structure of images. The art museum not only stages events but also is a medium for investigating the eventfulness of the event, of its boundaries and its structure. This investigation takes different forms, but it seems to me that its focal point is again reflections on the relationship between the event and its documentation, analogous to reflections on the relationship between original and reproduction, a central consideration for the art of modernism and postmodernism. The traditional hermeneutical position towards art required that the gaze of the external spectator penetrate the artwork, with the aim of discovering the artistic intentions, social forces, or vital energies that gave to the artwork its form. So, traditionally, the gaze of the spectator was directed from the outside of the artwork towards its inside. The gaze of the contemporary museum visitor is, rather, directed from the inside of the art event towards its outside – towards the possible external surveillance of this event and its documentation process, towards the eventual positioning of this documentation in the media space and in the cultural archives; in other words, towards the spatial boundaries of the event. And also towards its temporal boundaries, because being placed inside an event, we cannot know when this event began or when it might end.

The art system is generally characterized by the asymmetrical relationship between the gaze of the art producer and the gaze of the art spectator. These two gazes almost never meet. Earlier, once the artists had put their artwork on display they lost control over the gaze of the spectator: Whatever some art theoreticians may say, an artwork is a mere thing and cannot meet the spectator's gaze. So under the conditions of the traditional museum, the spectator's gaze was in a position of sovereign control – although even this sovereignty could be indirectly manipulated by the museum's curators through certain strategies of preselection, placement, juxtaposition, lighting, and so forth. However, if the museum begins to function as a chain of events, the configuration of gazes changes. The visitor loses his or her sovereignty in a very obvious way. Now the visitor is put inside an event and cannot meet the gaze of the camera that documents this event, the secondary gaze of the editor who does the postproduction work on the documentation, or the gaze of a later spectator of the documentation.

That is why, in visiting contemporary museum exhibitions, we are confronted with the irreversibility of time – we know that these exhibitions are merely temporary and we will not find them if we visit the same museum at some later date. The only things that remain will be the documentation: a catalogue, or a film, or a Web site. But what those records offer us is necessarily incommensurable with our own experience because our perspective, our gaze is asymmetrical with the gaze of a camera – and these perspectives cannot coincide as they might if an opera or a ballet were being recorded. That accounts for a certain kind of nostalgia that we necessarily feel when we are confronted with the documentation of past artistic events – exhibitions or performances. The nostalgia evoked by a recorded art event makes us desire a re-enactment of the event ‘as it truly was’. Today’s nostalgia for artworks or events, evoked by their documentation, reminds me of the early Romantic nostalgia towards nature, evoked by artworks. Art was seen then as a record of the beautiful or sublime aesthetic experiences offered to the being living and moving in Nature. Yet the paintings that recorded these experiences were apt to seem disappointing rather than authentic. In other words, if the irreversibility of time and the feeling of being inside and not outside of an event were once a privileged experience found in the midst of nature – now they are the privileged experience of found in being surrounded by contemporary art. And that is precisely why contemporary art became the medium for investigating the eventfulness of events – the different modes of immediate experience of the events, their relationship to documentation and archiving, the intellectual and emotional modes of our relationship to documentation. Now, if the thematization of the eventfulness of the event became, indeed, the main occupation of contemporary art in general and the museum of contemporary art in particular, it makes no sense to condemn the museum for staging art events. On the contrary, today the museum is the main analytical tool used to investigate the contingent and irreversible, in our digitally controlled civilization, which is based on retracing and securing the marks of our individual existence, in the hope of making everything controllable and reversible. The museum is a place where the asymmetrical war between ordinary human gaze and technologically armed gaze not only takes place but also is revealed, so that it can be thematized and critically theorized.

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1 Richard Wagner, *The Artwork of the Future and Other Works*, trans. W. Ashton Ellis, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press 1993, p. 94.

2 Ibid., p. 199.

3 Ibid., p. 201.

4 Hugo Ball, *Flight out of Time*, University of California Press: Berkeley 1996, p. 8.

5 Harald Szeemann, *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk*, Katalog zur Ausstellung am Kunsthaus Zurich, 1983.

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CHAPTER 2

Under the Gaze of Theory

From the start of its modern period, art began to manifest a certain dependence on theory. At that time – and even much later – art's 'need of explanation' (*Kommentarbeduerftigkeit*), as Arnold Gehlen characterized this hunger for theory, was in its turn explained by the fact that modern art is 'difficult' – inaccessible to the greater public.[1] According to this view, theory functions as propaganda – or, rather, as advertising: the theorist comes after the artwork is produced, and explains this artwork to a surprised and sceptical audience. As we know, many artists have mixed feelings about the theoretical interpretation of their art. They are grateful to the theorist for promoting and legitimizing their work, but irritated by the fact that their art is presented to the public under a certain theoretical perspective that often enough seems to the artists to be too narrow, dogmatic, even intimidating. Artists are looking for a bigger audience, but the number of theoretically informed spectators is rather small – in fact, even smaller than the audience for contemporary art. Thus, theoretical discourse reveals itself as a counterproductive form of advertisement: It narrows the audience instead of widening it. And this is truer now than ever before. Since the advent of modernity, the general public has made its grudging peace with the art of its time. Today's public accepts contemporary art even when it does not always feel that it 'understands' this art. The need for a theoretical explanation of art thus seems definitively passé.

And yet theory was never so central to art as it is now. So the question arises: Why is this the case? I would suggest that today artists need theory to explain what they are doing – not to others, but to themselves. In this respect they are not alone. Every contemporary person constantly asks these two questions: What has to be done? And even more importantly, How can I explain to myself what I am already doing? The urgency of these questions results from the collapse of tradition that we are experiencing today. Let us again take art as an example. In earlier times, to make art meant to practice – in ever-modified form – what previous generations of artists had done. In the modern period, to make art has meant to protest against what these previous generations did. But in both cases, it was more or less clear what that tradition looked like – and, accordingly, what form a protest against this tradition could take. Today, we are confronted with thousands of traditions floating around the globe – and with thousands of different forms of protest against them. Thus, if somebody now wants to become an artist and to make art, it is not immediately clear to him or her what art actually is, or what the artist is supposed to do. In order to start making art, one needs a theory that explains what art is. Such a theory makes it possible for artists to universalize, to globalize their art. A recourse to theory liberates them from their cultural identities – from the danger that their art will be perceived only as a local curiosity. That is the main reason for the rise of theory in our globalized world. Here, the theory – the theoretical, explanatory discourse – precedes art instead of coming after it.

However, one question remains unresolved. If we live in a time when every activity has to begin with a theoretical explanation of what this activity is, then one can draw the conclusion that we are living after the end of art, because art was traditionally opposed to reason, rationality, logic – covering, it was said, the domain of the irrational, emotional, theoretically unpredictable and unexplainable.

Indeed, from the very start, Western philosophy was extremely critical of art and rejected art outright as nothing other than a machine for the production of fictions and illusions. For Plato, to understand the world – to achieve the truth of the world – one had to follow not one’s imagination, but rather one’s reason. The sphere of reason was traditionally understood to include logic, mathematics, moral and civil laws, ideas of good and right, systems of state governance – all the methods and techniques that regulate and shape society. All these ideas could be understood by the exercise of human reason, but they could not be represented by any artistic practice, because they are abstract and therefore invisible. Thus, the philosopher was expected to turn from the external world of phenomena towards the internal reality of his own thinking – to investigate this thinking, to analyze the logic of the thinking process as such. Only in this way would the philosopher reach the condition of reason as the universal mode of thinking that unites all reasonable subjects, including, as Edmund Husserl said, gods, angels, demons, and humans. Therefore, the rejection of art can be understood as the originary gesture that constitutes the philosophical attitude. The opposition between philosophy (understood as love of truth) and art (construed as the production of lies and illusions) informs the whole history of Western culture. The negative attitude toward art was also maintained by the traditional alliance between art and religion. For a long time, art functioned as a didactic medium through which the transcendent, ungraspable, irrational authority of religion presented itself to humans: art represented gods and God, making them accessible to the human gaze. Religious art functioned as an object of trust – one believed that temples, statues, icons, religious poems and ritual performances were the spaces of divine presence. When Hegel said in the 1820s that art was a thing of the past, he meant that art had ceased to be a medium of (religious) truth. After the Enlightenment, nobody should or could be deceived by art any longer, for the evidence of reason was finally replacing seduction through art. Philosophy taught us to distrust religion and art, to trust our ability to think instead. The man of the Enlightenment despised art, believing only in himself, in the evidence of his own reason.

Yet modern and contemporary critical theory is nothing if not a critique of reason, rationality, and traditional logic. Here I mean not only this or that particular theory, but critical thinking in general as it has developed since the second half of the nineteenth century, following the decline of Hegelian philosophy.

We all know the names of the early and paradigmatic theoreticians. Karl Marx started modern critical discourse by interpreting the autonomy of reason as an illusion produced by the class structure of traditional societies, including bourgeois society. Marx conceived the impersonator of reason as a member of the dominant class, relieved from manual work and the necessity of participating in economic activity. Philosophers, Marx believed, could hold themselves immune to worldly seductions only because their basic needs were already satisfied, whereas underprivileged manual labourers were consumed by a struggle for survival that left them no opportunity to practice disinterested philosophical contemplation, to impersonate pure reason.

On the other hand, Nietzsche explained philosophy’s love of reason and truth as a symptom of the philosopher’s underprivileged position in real life. He saw in the will to truth an attempt on the side of the philosopher to overcompensate for a lack of vitality and real power by fantasizing about the universal power of reason. Nietzsche believed that philosophers are immune to the seduction of art simply because they are too weak, too ‘decadent’ to seduce or be seduced. Nietzsche denied the peaceful, purely contemplative nature of the philosophical attitude. For him, this attitude was merely a cover used by the weak to achieve success in the struggle for power and domination. Behind the apparent absence of vital interests, the theoretician discovers the hidden presence of a ‘decadent,’ or ‘sick’ will to power. According to Nietzsche, reason and its alleged instruments are designed only to subjugate other, non-philosophically inclined – that is, passionate, vital – characters. It is this great theme of Nietzschean philosophy that was later developed by Michel Foucault.

Thus, the theorist begins to perceive the figure of the meditating philosopher and its position in the world from the perspective of a normal, profane, external gaze. Theory sees the living body of the philosopher through perspectives that are not available to his self-reflection. Indeed, we cannot see our own body, its positions in the world, and the material processes that take place inside and outside of it – physical and chemical, but also economical, biopolitical, sexual, and so on. This means that we cannot truly practice self-reflection in the spirit of the philosophical dictum ‘Know yourself.’ Even more important, we cannot have an inner experience of the limitations of our temporal and spatial existence. We were not present at our birth – and we will be not present at our death. That is why all the philosophers who practiced self-reflection came to the conclusion that the spirit, the soul, and reason are all immortal. Indeed, in analyzing my own thinking process, I can never find any evidence of its finitude. To discover the limitations of my existence in space and time, I need the gaze of the Other. I read my death in the eyes of others. That is why Lacan says that the eye of the Other is always an evil eye, and Sartre says, 'Hell is other people.' Only through the profane gaze of others may I discover that I do not only think and feel – but also was born, live, and will die.

Descartes famously said, 'I think, therefore I am.' But a critically or theoretically minded spectator would say about Descartes: He thinks because he lives. Here my self-knowledge becomes radically undermined. Maybe I do know what I think. But I do not know how I live – I do not even know I am alive. Because I have never experienced myself as dead, I cannot experience myself as being alive. I have to ask others if and how I live – and that means I must also ask what I actually think, because I now see my thinking as being determined by my life. To live is to be exposed as living (and not as dead) to the gaze of the Others. Then it becomes irrelevant what we think, plan, or hope – what is relevant is how our bodies are moving in space under that gaze. It is in this way that theory knows me better than I know myself. The proud, enlightened subject of philosophy is dead. I am left with my body – and delivered to the gaze of the Other. Before the Enlightenment, man was subject to the gaze of God. But that era has passed, and now we are subject to the gaze of critical theory.

At first glance, the rehabilitation of the profane gaze also seems to entail a rehabilitation of art: In art, the human being becomes an image that can be seen and analyzed by the Other. But things are not that simple. Critical theory criticizes not only philosophical contemplation, but also any other kind of contemplation, including aesthetic contemplation. For the critical theorist, to think or contemplate is the same as being dead. In the gaze of the Other, if a body does not move it can only be a corpse. Philosophy privileges contemplation. Theory privileges action and practice, and hates passivity. If I cease to move, I fall off theory's radar – and theory does not like that. Every secular, postidealistic theory is a call for action. Every critical theory creates a state of urgency – even a state of emergency. Theory tells us that we are merely mortal, material organisms – and that we have little time at our disposal. We cannot waste our time in contemplation. Rather, we must act, here and now. Time does not wait and we do not have enough time for further delay. And while it is of course true that every theory offers a certain overview and explanation of the world (or explanation of why the world cannot be explained), these theoretical descriptions and scenarios play only an instrumental and transitory role. The true goal of every theory is to define the field of the action we are called upon to undertake.

This is where theory demonstrates its solidarity with the general mood of our times. In earlier times, recreation meant passive contemplation. In their free time, people went to theatres, cinemas, or museums, or stayed home to read books or watch TV. Guy Debord described this as the society of the spectacle – a society in which freedom took the form of free time associated with passivity and escape from ordinary living conditions. But today's society is unlike that spectacular society. In their free time, people work – they travel, play sports, and exercise. They don't read books; they write for Facebook, Twitter, and other social media. They do not look at art but instead take photos or film videos, and send them to their relatives and friends. People have become very active indeed. They design their free time by doing many kinds of work. This activation of human bodies correlates with the media world which is dominated by moving images, whether film or video. Indeed, one cannot represent the movement of thought or the state of contemplation through these media. One cannot represent this movement even through the traditional arts; Rodin's famous statue *The Thinker* actually presents a guy resting after working out at a gym. The movement of thought is invisible. Thus, it cannot be represented by a contemporary culture oriented towards visually transmittable information. So one can say that theory's call to action fits very well within the contemporary media environment.

But, of course, theory does not call on us to merely take action. Rather, theory calls for a specific action that would implement the theory itself. Indeed, every critical theory is not merely informative but also transformative. The scene of theoretical discourse is one of conversion that exceeds the terms of communication. The act of communication itself does not change its participants: I have transmitted information to somebody, and someone else has transmitted some information to me. Both participants retain their identities during and after this exchange. But critical theoretical discourse is not simply an informative discourse, for it does not simply transmit certain knowledge. Rather, it asks questions concerning the meaning of knowledge. What does it mean that I have a certain new piece of knowledge? How has this new knowledge transformed me, how it has influenced my general attitude towards the world? How has this knowledge changed my personality, modified my way of life? To answer these questions, one has to engage in theory – to show how certain knowledge transforms one's behaviour. In this respect, theoretical discourse is similar to religious and philosophical discourse. Religion describes the world, but it is not satisfied with this descriptive role alone. It also calls on us to believe the description and to demonstrate this faith and act on it. Philosophy also calls us not only to believe in the power of reason but also to act reasonably, rationally. Theory not only wants us to believe that we are primarily finite, living bodies, but also demands that we demonstrate this belief. Under the regime of theory, it is not enough to live: One must also demonstrate that one lives, one must perform being alive. And now I would argue that in our culture it is art that performs this knowledge of being alive.

Indeed, the main goal of art is to show, expose, and exhibit modes of life. Accordingly, art has often played the role of performer of knowledge, showing what it means to live with and through a certain knowledge. It is well known that Kandinsky would explain his turn towards abstract art by referring to the conversion of mass into energy in Einstein's theory of relativity. The economic determination of human existence thematized by Marxism was reflected in the Russian avant-garde. Surrealism articulated the discovery of the subconscious. Somewhat later, conceptual art reacted to the different theories of language.

Of course, one can ask: Who is the subject of such an artistic performance of knowledge? By now, we have heard of the many deaths of the subject, the author, the speaker, and so forth. But all of these obituaries concerned the subject of philosophical reflection and self-reflection – or also the subject of desire and vital energy. By contrast, the performative subject is constituted by the call to act, to demonstrate oneself as alive. I know myself as addressee of this call, and it tells me: Change yourself, show your knowledge, manifest your life, take transformative action, transform the world, and so on. This call is directed toward *me*. That is how I know that I can, and must, answer it.

And, by the way, this call to act does not come from a divine source. The theorist is also a human being, and I have no reason to completely trust his or her intention. The Enlightenment taught us, as I have already mentioned, to distrust the gaze of the Other – to suspect others (priests and so forth) of pursuing their own agenda, hidden behind their appellative discourses. And theory taught us not to trust ourselves or the evidence of our own reason. In this sense, every performance of a theory is at the same time a performance of the distrust of this theory. We perform the image of life to demonstrate ourselves as living – but also to shield ourselves from the evil eye of the theorist, to hide behind our image. And this, in fact, is precisely what theory wants from us. After all, theory also distrusts itself. As Theodor Adorno said, the whole is false and there is no true life in the false.[2]

Artists should not necessarily take a position of appellees. They may not perform, but rather join the transformative call. Instead of becoming active, they can try to activate others. And they can become critical towards anyone who does not answer theory’s call. Here, art takes on an illustrative, didactic, educational role – comparable to the didactic role of the artist in the framework of, let us say, Christian faith. In other words, the modern artist makes secular propaganda, comparable to religious propaganda. I am not critical of this propagandistic turn. It has produced many interesting works in the course of the twentieth century and remains productive today. However, artists who practice this type of propaganda often speak about the ineffectiveness of art – as if everybody could and should be persuaded by art even if he or she cannot be persuaded by theory itself. Propaganda art is not specifically inefficient; it simply shares the successes and failures of the theory that it propagates.

These two artistic attitudes, the performance of theory and theory as propaganda, are not only different, but also conflicting, even incompatible, interpretations of theory's 'call.' This incompatibility has produced many conflicts, even tragedies, within art on the left – and indeed on the right as well – during the course of the twentieth century. Critical theory, from its beginnings in the work of Marx and Nietzsche, has seen the human being as a finite, material body, devoid of ontological access to the eternal or metaphysical. That means that there is no ontological, metaphysical guarantee of success for any human action, just as there is also no guarantee of failure. Any human action can be at any moment interrupted by death. The event of death is radically heterogeneous in relationship to any teleological construction of history. From the perspective of vitalistic theory, death does not have to coincide with fulfilment. The end of the world does not have to be apocalyptic and reveal the truth of human existence. Rather, we know life as nonteleological, as having no unifying divine or historical plan that we can contemplate and upon which we can rely. Indeed, we know ourselves to be involved in an uncontrollable play of material forces that makes every action contingent. We watch the permanent change of fashions. We watch the irreversible advance of technology that will eventually make any life form obsolete. Thus we are called, continually, to abandon our skills, our knowledge, and our plans as being out of date. Whatever we see, we expect its disappearance sooner rather than later. Whatever we plan to do today, we expect to change tomorrow.

In other words, theory confronts us with the paradox of urgency. The basic image that theory offers to us is the image of our own death – an image of our mortality, of radical finitude and lack of time. By offering us this image, theory produces in us the feeling of urgency – a feeling that impels us to answer its call for action now rather than later. But at the same time, this feeling of urgency and lack of time prevents us from conceiving long-term projects; from basing our actions on long-term planning; from having great personal and historical expectations concerning the results of our actions.

A good example of this performance of urgency can be seen in Lars von Trier's film *Melancholia* (2011). Two sisters see their approaching death in the form of the planet Melancholia as it draws closer to the earth, about to annihilate it. Planet Melancholia looks upon them, and they read their death in the planet's neutral, objectifying gaze. It is a good metaphor for the gaze of theory, and the two sisters are called by this gaze to react to it. Here we find a typical modern, secular case of extreme urgency – inescapable, yet at the same time purely contingent. The slow approach of Melancholia is a call for action. But what kind of action? One sister tries to escape this image of death – to save herself and her child. It is a reference to the typical Hollywood apocalyptic movie in which an attempt to escape a world catastrophe always succeeds. But the other sister is seduced by the image of death to the point of orgasm. Rather than spend the rest of her life warding off death, she performs a welcoming ritual – one that activates and excites her. Here we find a good model of two opposing ways of reacting to the feeling of urgency and lack of time.

Indeed, the same urgency, the same lack of time that pushes us to act suggests that our actions will probably not achieve any goals or produce any results. It is an insight that was well described by Walter Benjamin in his famous parable using Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*: If we look towards the future we see only promises, while if we look towards the past we can see only the ruins of promises.[3] This image was generally interpreted by Benjamin's readers as pessimistic. But it is in fact optimistic – in a certain way, this image reproduces a thematic from a much earlier essay in which Benjamin distinguishes between two types of violence: divine and mythical.[4] Mythical violence produces destruction that leads from an old order to new orders. Divine violence only destroys – without establishing any new order. This divine destruction is permanent (similar to Trotsky's idea of permanent revolution). But today, a reader of Benjamin's essay on violence inevitably asks how divine violence can be eternally inflicted if it is only destructive. At some point, everything would be destroyed and divine violence itself would become impossible. Indeed, if God has created the world out of nothingness, he can also destroy it completely – leaving no traces.

But the point is precisely this: Benjamin uses the image of *Angelus Novus* in the context of his materialist concept of history, in which divine violence becomes material violence. Thus, it becomes clear why Benjamin does not believe in the possibility of total destruction. Indeed, if God is dead, the material world becomes indestructible. In the secular, purely material world, destruction can be only material destruction, produced by material forces, and any material destruction remains only partially successful. It always leaves ruins, traces, vestiges behind – precisely as described by Benjamin in his parable. In other words, if we cannot totally destroy the world, the world also cannot totally destroy us. Total success is impossible, but so is total failure. The materialist vision of the world opens a zone beyond success and failure, conservation and annihilation, acquisition and loss. Now, this is precisely the zone in which art operates if it wants to perform its knowledge of the materiality of the world – and of life as a material process. And although the art of the historic avant-gardes has also been accused often of being nihilistic and destructive, the destructiveness of avant-garde art was motivated by its belief in the impossibility of total destruction. One can say that the avant-garde, looking towards the future, saw precisely the same image that Benjamin's *Angelus Novus* saw when looking towards the past.

From the outset, modern and contemporary art has integrated the possibilities of failure, historical irrelevance, and destruction within its own activities. Thus, art cannot be shocked by what it sees in the rear window of progress. The avant-garde's *Angelus Novus* always sees the same thing, whether it looks into the future or into the past. Here, life is understood as a non-teleological, purely material process. To practice life means to be aware of the possibility of its interruption at any moment by death – and thus to avoid pursuing any definite goals and objectives, because such pursuits can also be interrupted by death at any moment. In this sense, life is radically heterogeneous with regard to any concept of history that can be narrated only as disparate instances of success and failure.

For a very long time, man was ontologically situated between God and the animals. Then, it seemed more prestigious to be placed nearer to God, and further from the animals. In modern times and our present day, we tend to situate man between the animals and the machines. In this new order, it seems better to be an animal than a machine. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but also today, there was a tendency to present life as a deviation from a certain programme – as the difference between a living body and a machine. However, as the machine paradigm was assimilated, the contemporary human being was increasingly seen as an animal acting as a machine – an industrial machine or a computer. If we accept this Foucauldian perspective, the living human body – human animality – does indeed manifest itself through deviation from the programme, through error, through madness, chaos, and unpredictability. That is why contemporary art often tends to thematize deviation and error, that is, everything that breaks away from the norm and disturbs the established social programme.

Here it is important to note that the classical avant-garde placed itself more on the side of the machine than on the side of the human animal. Radical avant-gardists, from Malevich and Mondrian to Sol LeWitt and Donald Judd, practiced their art according to machine-like programmes in which deviation and variance were contained by the generative laws of their respective projects. However, these programmes were internally different from any 'real' programme, because they were neither utilitarian nor instrumentalizing. Our real social, political, and technical programmes are oriented towards achieving a certain goal – and they are judged according to their efficiency or ability to achieve this goal. Art programmes and machines, however, are not teleologically oriented. They have no definite goal; they simply go on and on. At the same time, these programmes include the possibility of being interrupted at any moment without losing their integrity. Here art reacts to the paradox of urgency produced by materialist theory and its call to action. On the one hand, our finiteness, our ontological lack of time compels us to abandon the state of contemplation and passivity and begin to act. Yet this same lack of time dictates a form of action that is not directed towards any particular goal and that can be interrupted at any moment. Such an action is conceived from the beginning as having no specific ending – unlike an action that ends when its goal is achieved. Thus artistic action becomes infinitely continuable and/or repeatable. Here the lack of time is transformed into a surplus of time – in fact, an infinite surplus of time.

It is characteristic that the operation of the so-called aestheticization of reality is effectuated precisely by this shift from a teleological to a non-teleological interpretation of historical action. For example, it is not accidental that Che Guevara became the aesthetic symbol of revolutionary movement: All of his revolutionary undertakings ended in failure. But that is precisely why the attention of the spectator shifts from the goal of revolutionary action to the life of a revolutionary hero failing to achieve his goals. This life then reveals itself as brilliant and fascinating, with no regard for practical results. Such examples can, of course, be multiplied.

In the same way, one can argue that the performance of theory by art also implies the aestheticization of theory. Surrealism can be interpreted as the aestheticization of psychoanalysis. In his *First Manifesto of Surrealism*, Andre Breton famously proposed a technique of automatic writing. The idea was to write so fast that neither consciousness nor unconsciousness could catch up with the writing process. Here the psychoanalytical practice of free association is imitated, but detached from its normative goal. Later, after reading Marx, Breton exhorted readers of his Second Manifesto to pull out a revolver and fire randomly into the crowd; again, the revolutionary action becomes nonpurposeful. Even earlier, Dadaists practiced discourse beyond meaning and coherence – a discourse that could be interrupted at any moment without losing its consistency. The same can be said, in fact, about the speeches of Joseph Beuys: They were excessively long but could be interrupted at any moment because they were not subject to the goal of making an argument. And the same can be said about many other contemporary artistic practices: They can be interrupted or reactivated at any time. Failure thus becomes impossible, because the criteria for success are absent. Now, many people in the art world deplore the fact that such art is not and cannot be successful in 'real life'. Here real life is understood as history and success as historical success. Earlier I showed that the notion of history does not coincide with the notion of life – in particular with the notion of 'real life' – for history is an ideological construction based on a concept of progressive movement toward a certain telos. This teleological model of progressive history has roots in Christian theology. It does not correspond to the post-Christian, post-philosophical, materialist view of the world. Art is emancipatory. Art changes the world and liberates us. But it is does so precisely by liberating us from history – by liberating life from history.

Classical philosophy was emancipatory because it protested against the religious and aristocratic military rule that suppressed reason and individual human beings as bearers of reason. The Enlightenment wanted to change the world through the liberation of reason. Today, after Nietzsche, Foucault, Deleuze, and many others, we tend to believe that reason does not liberate but rather suppresses us. Now we want to change the world to liberate life – which has been increasingly regarded as a more fundamental condition of human existence than reason. In fact, life seems to us to be subjected and oppressed by the same institutions that proclaim themselves to be models of rational progress, with the promotion of life as their goal. Liberating ourselves from the power of these institutions means rejecting their universal claims based on precepts of reason.

Theory calls on us to change not merely this or that aspect of the world but rather the world as a whole. But here the question arises: Is such a total, revolutionary, and not only gradual, particular, evolutionary change possible? Theory believes that every transformative action can be effectuated because there is no metaphysical, ontological guarantee of the status quo, of a dominating order, of existing realities. But at the same time, there is also no ontological guarantee of a successful total change – no divine providence, power of nature or reason, direction of history, or other determinable outcome. Classical Marxism proclaimed faith in a guarantee of total change (in the form of productive forces that will explode social structures), and Nietzsche believed in the power of desire to explode all civilizing conventions, but today we have difficulty in believing in the collaboration of such infinite powers. Once we have rejected the infinity of the spirit, it makes little sense to replace it with a theology of production or desire. But then, if we are mortal and finite, how can we successfully change the world? As I have already suggested, the criteria for success and failure are precisely what define the world in its totality. So if we change – or, even better, abolish – these criteria, we do indeed change the world in its totality. And, as I have tried to show, art can do it, and in fact has already done it.

But, of course, one can further ask, What is the social relevance of such a non-instrumental, non-teleological, artistic performance of life? I would suggest that it is the production of the social as such. Indeed, we should not think that the social is always already there. Society is an area of equality and similarity: Originally, society, or *politeia*, emerged in Athens as a society of the equal and similar. Ancient Greek societies – which are the model for every modern society – were based on commonalities, such as upbringing, aesthetic taste, language. Their members were effectively interchangeable through a physical and cultural orientation toward shared values. Every member of a Greek society could do what the others did in the fields of sport, rhetoric, or war.

But traditional societies based on given commonalities no longer exist.

Today we are living not in a society of similarity, but rather in a society of difference. And the society of difference is not a *politeia* but a market economy. If I live in a society in which everyone is specialized, and has his or her specific cultural identity, then I offer to others what I have and can do, and receive from them what they have or can do. These networks of exchange also function as networks of communication, as rhizomes. Freedom of communication is only a special case for the free market. However, theory, and art that performs theory, produce similarity beyond the differences that are induced by the market economy, and so theory and art compensate for the absence of traditional commonalities. It is not accidental that the call to human solidarity is almost always accompanied in our time not by an appeal to common origins, common sense and reason, or the commonality of human nature, but to the danger of common death, for example through nuclear war or global warming. We are different in our modes of existence, but similar in our mortality.

In earlier times, philosophers and artists wanted to be (and understood themselves as being) exceptional human beings capable of creating exceptional ideas and things. But today, theorists and artists do not want to be exceptional – rather, they want to be like everybody else. Their preferred topic is everyday life. They want to be typical, nonspecific, unidentifiable, unrecognizable in a crowd. And they want to do what everybody else does: prepare food (Rirkrit Tiravanija) or kick an ice block along the road (Francis Alÿs). Kant already contended that art is not a thing of truth, but of taste, and that it can and should be discussed by everyone. The discussion of art is open to everyone because by definition no one can be a specialist in art, only a dilettante. That means art was from its beginnings social – and becomes democratic if one abolishes the boundaries of high society (still a model of society for Kant). However, from the time of the avant-garde onwards, art became not only an object of a discussion, free from the criteria of truth, but a universal, nonspecific, nonproductive, generally accessible activity free from any criteria of success. Advanced contemporary art is basically art production without a product. It is an activity in which everyone can participate, one that is all-inclusive and truly egalitarian.

In saying all this, I do not have something like relational aesthetics in mind. I also do not believe that art, if understood in this way, can be truly participatory or democratic. And now I will try to explain why. Our understanding of democracy is based on a conception of the national state. We do not have a framework of universal democracy transcending national borders, and we never had such a democracy in the past. So we cannot say what a truly universal, egalitarian democracy would look like. In addition, democracy is traditionally understood as the rule of a majority, and of course we can imagine democracy as not excluding any minority and as operating by consensus, but still, this consensus will necessarily include only ‘normal, reasonable’ people. It will never include ‘mad’ people, children, and so forth.

It will also not include animals. It will not include birds, although, as we know, St. Francis preached sermons to animals and birds. It will also not include stones, although we know from Freud that there is a drive in us that compels us to become stones. It will also not include machines, even if many artists and theorists have wanted to become machines. In other words, an artist is somebody who is not merely social, but supersocial, to use the term coined by Gabriel Tarde in the framework of his theory of imitation.[5] The artist imitates and establishes himself or herself as similar and equal to too many organisms, figures, objects, and phenomena that will never become a part of any democratic process. To use a very precise phrase of George Orwell’s, some artists, are, indeed, more equal than others. While contemporary art is often criticized for being too elitist, not social enough, actually the contrary is true: art and artists are supersocial. And, as Gabriel Tarde rightly remarks, to become truly supersocial one has to isolate oneself from society.

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[1] Arnold Gehlen, *Zeit-Bilder. Zur Soziologie und Aesthetik der modernen Malerei*, Frankfurt: Athenaeum, 1960.

[2] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. N. Jephcott, London: Verso 1974, pp. 50 and 39 respectively.

[3] Walter Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History,’ *Selected Writings*, vol. 4: 1938-40, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2003, pp. 389–400.

[4] Benjamin, ‘Critique of Violence,’ in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1: 1913–26, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1999, pp. 236–52.

[5] Gabriel Tarde, *The Laws of Imitation*, New York: Henry Holt and Co. 1903, p. 88.

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CHAPTER 3

On Art Activism

The current discussions about art are very much centred on the question of art activism; that is, on the ability of art to function as arena and medium of political protest and social activism. The phenomenon of art activism is central to our time because it is a new phenomenon, quite different from the phenomenon of critical art that became familiar to us in recent decades. The art activists do not want to merely criticize the art system or the general political and social conditions under which this system functions. Rather, they want to change these conditions by means of art – not so much inside the art system as outside it, that is, change the conditions of reality itself. Art activists try to change living conditions in economically underdeveloped areas, raise ecological concerns, offer access to culture and education to the populations of poor countries and areas, attract attention to the plight of illegal immigrants, improve conditions for people working in art institutions. In other words, art activists react to the increasing collapse of the modern social state and try to substitute for social institutions and NGOs that for different reasons cannot or will not fulfil their role. Art activists want to be useful, to change the world, to make the world a better place – but at the same time, they do not want to cease to be artists. And that is the point where theoretical, political and even purely practical problems arise.

Art activism's attempts to combine art and social action come under attack from those with traditionally artistic and those with traditionally activist perspectives. Traditional art criticism operates on the notion of artistic quality. From this point of view, art activism is seen as artistically inadequate: Many critics say that these artists substitute morally good intentions for artistic quality. In fact, this kind of criticism is easy to reject. During the twentieth century, all criteria of quality and taste were abolished by different artistic avant-gardes – so today, it makes no sense to reinvoke them. Criticism from the activist side is much more serious and demands an elaborate critical answer. Activist criticism mainly operates on the notions of ‘aestheticization and ‘spectacularity’. According to a certain intellectual tradition with its roots in writings by Walter Benjamin and Guy Debord, the aestheticization and spectacularization of politics, including political protest, are bad things, because they divert attention from the practical goals of the political protest towards its aesthetic form. And that means that art cannot be used as a medium of a genuine political protest, because the use of art for a political action necessarily aestheticizes this action, turns the action into a spectacle, and thus neutralizes the practical effect of the action. As an example, it is enough to remember the recent Berlin Biennale curated by Artur Zmijevski and the criticism that it provoked: It was described from a number of ideological viewpoints as a zoo for art activists.

In other words, the art component of the art activism is seen, often enough, as the main reason why this activism fails on the pragmatic, practical level – on the level of its immediate social and political impact. In our society, art has traditionally been seen as useless. So it seems that this quasi-ontological uselessness infects art activism and condemns it to failure. At the same time, art is seen as ultimately celebrating and aestheticizing the status quo, undermining our will to change it. The way out of this situation is generally supposed to be the abandonment of art – as if social and political activism never fails if it is not infected by the art virus.

The critique of art as useless and therefore morally and politically problematic is not a new one. In the past this critique led many artists to abandon art altogether in order to practice something more useful, something morally and politically correct. However, contemporary art activists are not in a hurry to abandon art; rather, they try to make art itself useful. This is a historically new position. Some critics question its newness by referring to the Russian avant-garde, which famously wanted to change the world by artistic means. It seems to me that this reference is incorrect. The Russian avant-garde artists of the 1920s believed in their ability to change the world because at that time their artistic practice was supported by the Soviet authorities. They knew power was on their side, and they hoped this support would not decrease over time. Contemporary art activism has, on the contrary, no reason to believe in external political support. Art activism acts on its own, relying only on its own networks and on the weak and uncertain financial support provided by progressively minded art institutions. This is, as I said, a new situation, and it calls for a new theoretical reflection.

The central goal of such a reflection must be to analyze the precise meaning and political function of the word *aestheticization*. I believe that such an analysis will allow us to clarify discussions about art activism and the place where it stands and acts. I would argue that today the word is mostly used in a confused and confusing way. One speaks of aestheticization meaning different and often even opposing theoretical and political operations. The reason for this state of confusion is the division of contemporary art practice itself into two different domains: art in the proper sense of this word, and design. In these two domains, *aestheticization* means two different and opposing things. Let us analyze this difference.

Aestheticization as Revolution

In the domain of design, aestheticization of certain technical tools, commodities or events means an attempt to make them more attractive, seductive, appealing to the user. Here, being aestheticized does not prevent the designed object from being used – on the contrary, it enhances and spreads the object's use by making it more agreeable to the user. In this sense, we should see the whole art of the premodern past as not art but design. Indeed, the ancient Greeks spoke of *techne* – not differentiating between art and technology. If one looks at the art of ancient China, one finds well-designed objects and tools for religious ceremonies and everyday purposes used by court functionaries and intellectuals. The same can be said about the art of ancient Egypt or the Inca empire: it is not art in the modern sense of the word, but design. The same can be said about art under the old European regimes before the French revolution – here, too, we find no art that is not a religious design or a design for power and wealth. Now, under contemporary conditions, design is omnipresent. Almost everything that we use is professionally designed to make it more attractive for the user. It is what we mean when we say about a well-designed commodity, ‘It is a real work of art’ – as we say about an iPhone, or a beautiful airplane.

The same can be said about politics. We are living in a time of political design, of professional image-making. When one speaks, for example, about the aestheticization of politics, referring, let us say, to Nazi Germany, often enough one means design – the attempt to make the Nazi movement more attractive, more seductive: black uniforms, torchlight processions. It is important to see that this understanding of aestheticization as design has nothing to do with the definition of aestheticization used by Walter Benjamin when he speaks of Fascism as the aestheticization of politics. This other notion of aestheticization has its origin not in design but in modern art.

Indeed, when we speak of artistic aestheticization we do not mean an attempt to make the functioning of a certain technical tool more attractive for the user. Quite the contrary, artistic aestheticization means the defunctionalization of the tool, the violent annulment of its practical applicability and efficiency. Our contemporary notion of art and artistic aestheticization has its roots in the French revolution – in the decisions taken by the French revolutionary government concerning the objects it inherited from the ancien régime. A change of regime – especially, a radical change such as that introduced by the French revolution – is usually accompanied by the wave of iconoclasm. One can follow these waves in the cases of Protestantism, the Spanish Conquest and, recently, after the fall of the Socialist regimes in Eastern Europe. The French revolutionaries took a different course: Instead of destroying the sacral and profane objects belonging to the old regime, they defunctionalized, or in other words, aestheticized them. The French revolution turned the designs of the old regime into what we call art, that is, into objects not for use but for pure contemplation. This violent, revolutionary act of aestheticizing the old regime created art as we know it today.

Before the French revolution there was no art – only design. After the French revolution, art emerged as the death of design.

The revolutionary origin of aesthetics was conceptualized by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Almost at the beginning of this text, Kant makes clear its political context. He writes:

> If someone asks me whether I find the palace that I see before me beautiful, I may well say that I do not like that sort of thing, in true Rousseauesque manner I might even vilify the vanity of the great who waste the sweat of the people on such a superfluous thing … All of this might be conceded to me and approved; but that is not what is at issue here. One must not be in the least biased in favour of the existence of the thing, but must be entirely indifferent in this respect in order to play the judge in the matter of taste.[1]

Kant is not interested in the existence of a palace as a representation of wealth and power. However, he is ready to accept the palace as aestheticized, which means, actually, negated, made nonexistent for all practical purposes – reduced to a pure form. Here the inevitable question arises: What should one say about the decision by the French revolutionaries to substitute for total iconoclastic destruction of the ancien régime the aesthetic defunctionalization of it? And is the theoretical legitimation of this aesthetic defunctionalization that was proposed almost simultaneously by Kant a sign of cultural weakness in the European bourgeoisie? Maybe it would have been better to completely destroy the corpse of the old regime instead of exhibiting it as art – as an object of pure aesthetic contemplation? I would argue that aestheticization is a much more radical form of death that traditional iconoclasm.

Already during the nineteenth century, museums were often compared to cemeteries, and museum curators to gravediggers. However, the museum is much more a cemetery than any other. Real cemeteries do not expose the corpses of the dead, but rather conceal them, just as the Egyptian pyramids did. By concealing their corpses, cemeteries create an obscure, hidden space of mystery and thus suggest the possibility of resurrection. We all have read about spectres, vampires leaving their graves, and other undead wandering in cemeteries and around them in the night. We have seen movies about a night in the museum: when nobody is looking at them, the dead bodies of the artworks get a chance to come alive again. However, the museum by daylight is a place of a definitive death that allows no resurrection, no return of the past. The museum institutionalizes the truly radical, atheistic, revolutionary violence that demonstrates the past as incurably dead. It is a purely materialistic death, without return – the aestheticized material corpse functions as a testimony to the impossibility of resurrection.

(Incidentally, this is why Stalin insisted so much on the permanent exposure of the dead Lenin's body to the public. The Lenin Mausoleum was a visible guarantee that Lenin and Leninism were truly dead. That is also why the current leaders of Russia are still in no rush to bury Lenin – against all the appeals by many Russians that they do so. They do not want the return of Leninism that would become possible again if Lenin were to be buried.)

So, since the French revolution, art has been understood as the defunctionalized and publicly exhibited corpse of past reality. This understanding of art has determined post-revolutionary art strategies until now. In the art context, to aestheticize the things of the present means to discover their dysfunctional, absurd, unworkable character – everything that makes them nonusable, inefficient, obsolete. To aestheticize the present means to turn it into the dead past. In other words, artistic aestheticization is the opposite of aestheticization by means of design. The goal of design is to aesthetically improve the status quo – to make it more attractive. Art also accepts the status quo, but it accepts it as a corpse, following its transformation into a mere representation. In this sense, art sees contemporaneity from not only the revolutionary, but also the postrevolutionary perspective. One can say that modern or contemporary art sees modernity or contemporaneity as the French revolutionaries saw the designs of the old regime: already obsolete, reducible to a pure form, already a corpse.

Aestheticizing Modernity

Actually, this is especially true for the artists of the avant-garde, who are often mistakenly seen as heralds of the new technological world – as marching in the vanguard of technological progress. Nothing is further from the historical truth. Of course, artists of the historical avant-garde were interested in technological, industrialized modernity. However, they were interested in technological modernity only as something to aestheticize, to defunctionalize, in order to demonstrate their conviction that progress is irrational, absurd. When one speaks about the avant-garde in its relationship to technology, one historical figure usually comes to mind: Fillipo Tommaso Marinetti and his Futurist Manifesto, published on the front page of *Le Figaro* in 1909.[2] The text condemned the 'passéistic' cultural taste of the bourgeoisie and celebrated the beauty of the new industrial civilization ('a roaring motorcar, which seems to race on like machine-gun fire, is more beautiful than the Winged Victory of Samothrace'); glorified war as the 'hygiene of the world'; and wished 'to destroy museums, libraries and academies of any sort'. Identification with the ideology of progress seems here to be complete. However, Marinetti did not publish the text of the Futurist Manifesto separately, but instead included it in a story that begins with a description of how he interrupted a long nocturnal conversation with his friends about poetry with a call to stand up and drive far away in a fast car. And so they did. Marinetti writes:

> And we, like young lions, chased after Death … Nothing at all worth dying for, other than the desire to divest ourselves finally of the courage that weighed us down.

And the divestment took place. Marinetti describes the nocturnal ride further:

> How ridiculous! What a nuisance! … I braked hard and to my disgust the wheels left the ground and I flew into the ditch. … O mother of a ditch, brimful with muddy water. How I relished your strength-giving sludge that reminded me so much of the saintly black breasts of my Sudanese nurse.

I will not dwell too long on this figure of the return to the mother womb and to the nurse's breasts after a frenetic ride in a car towards death – it is all sufficiently obvious. Here it is enough to say that Marinetti and his friends were plucked out of the ditch by a group of fishermen and, as he writes, ‘some gouty old naturalists’ – that is, by the same representatives of the past against which his manifesto is directed. Thus, the manifesto is introduced by the description of a failure of its own programme. And so one cannot wonder that the text fragment that concludes the manifesto repeats the figure of defeat. Following the logic of the progress Marinetti envisions, with the coming of a new generation, he and his friends will be in their turn the hated passéists who should be destroyed. But he writes that when the agents of this coming generation try to destroy him and his friends, they will find them ‘on a winter’s night in a humble shed, far away in the country with an incessant rain drumming upon us – and warming our hands at the flickering flames of our present-day books.’

These passages show that for Marinetti, to aestheticize technologically driven modernity does not mean to glorify it or try to improve it, to make it more efficient by means of better design. Quite the contrary, from the beginning of his artistic carrier Marinetti looks at the modernity in retrospect, as if it has already collapsed, as if it has already become a thing of the past – imagining himself in the ditch of History or, at the best, sitting in the countryside under the postapocalyptic, incessant rain. And in this retrospective view, technologically driven, progress-oriented modernity looks like a total catastrophe. It is hardly an optimistic perspective. Marinetti envisions the failure of his own project, but he understands this failure as a failure of progress itself that leaves behind only debris, ruins and personal catastrophes.

I quote Marinetti at some length because it is precisely Marinetti whom Benjamin calls on as the crucial witness when, in the afterword to his famous essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,’ Benjamin formulates his critique of the aestheticization of politics as the fascist undertaking par excellence.[3] And this critique still weighs heavily on any attempt to bring art and politics together. To make his point, Benjamin cites a later text by Marinetti on the Ethiopian war that draws parallels between modern war operations and the poetic and artistic operations used by the Futurist artists. In it, Marinetti famously speaks about ‘the metallization of the human body' – and *metallization* has only one meaning: the death of the body turning it into a corpse understood as an art object. Benjamin interprets this text as a proclamation of the war by art against life and summarizes the fascist political programme with the words: *Fiat art – pereas mundi*. Benjamin writes further that the fascism is the fulfilment of the *l'art pour l'art* movement.

Of course, Benjamin's analysis of Marinetti's rhetoric is correct. There is only one question here, but it is crucial: How reliable is Marinetti as a witness? Marinetti's fascism is an already aestheticized fascism – fascism understood as a heroic acceptance of defeat and death. Or as a pure form – the pure image that a writer has of fascism when this writer is sitting alone and under the incessant rain. Real fascism wanted, of course, not defeat but victory. In fact, in the late 1920s and 1930s Marinetti became less and less influential inside the Italian Fascist movement that practiced precisely not the aestheticization of politics but the politicization of aesthetics by using Novecento and Neoclassicism and, yes, also Futurism for its political goals – or, we can say, for its political design.

In his essay, Benjamin opposes the Fascists' aestheticization of politics to the Communists' politicization of aesthetics. However, in the Russian and Soviet art of the time the fronts were drawn in a much more complicated way. We speak today of the Russian avant-garde, but Russian artists and poets of that time spoke about Russian Futurism – and then Suprematism and Constructivism. Now, inside these movements, we find the same phenomenon, the aestheticization of Soviet Communism. Already in 1919, Kazimir Malevich, in his essay 'On the Museum,' not only calls for burning the art heritage of previous epochs but also for accepting that 'everything that we do is done for the crematorium'.[4] In the same year, in the essay 'God is not Cast Down', Malevich argues that to achieve the perfect material conditions for human existence, as the Communists intended, is as impossible as to achieve the perfection of the human soul, as the Church previously attempted.[5] The founder of Soviet Constructivism, Vladimir Tatlin, built a model of his famous Tower of the Third International, which was meant to rotate but could not, and, later, a plane that could not fly (the so-called Letatlin). Here again, Soviet Communism was aestheticized from the perspective of its historical failure, of its coming death. And, again, in the Soviet Union the aestheticization of politics was turned later into the politicization of aesthetics – the use of aesthetics for political goals, as political design.

Now I do not want, of course, to say that there is no difference between fascism and communism – the difference is immense and decisive. I only want to say that the opposition between fascism and communism does not coincide with the difference between the aestheticization of politics taking root in the modern art, and the politicization of aesthetics, manifested in political design.

I hope I have clarified the political function of these two divergent and even contradictory notions, artistic aestheticization and design aestheticization. The aim of design is to change reality, the status quo –to improve reality, to make it more attractive, better to use. Art seems to accept reality, the status quo, as it is. But art accepts the status quo as dysfunctional, as already failed, from the revolutionary or even postrevolutionary perspective. Contemporary art puts our contemporaneity into the art museum because it does not believe in the stability of the present conditions of existence, to such a degree that contemporary art does not even try to improve these conditions. By defunctionalizing the status quo, art prefigures its coming revolutionary overthrow. Or a new global war. Or a new global catastrophe. In any case, an event that will make the whole contemporary culture, including all of its aspirations and projections, obsolete, as the French revolution rendered obsolete all the aspirations, intellectual projections and utopias of the old regime.

Contemporary art activism is the heir of these two contradictory traditions of aestheticization. On the one hand, art activism politicizes art, uses art as political design – as a tool in the political struggles of our time. This use is completely legitimate, and to criticize it would be absurd. Design is an integral part of our culture, and it would make no sense to forbid its use by politically oppositional movements on the pretext that this use leads to spectacularization, theatricalization of the political protest. After all, there is good theatre and bad theatre.

But art activism cannot escape a much more radical, revolutionary tradition of the aestheticization of politics: the acceptance of one's own failure, understood as a premonition and prefiguration of a coming failure of the status quo in its totality that will leave no room for its improvement or correction. The fact that contemporary art activism is caught up in this contradiction is a good, not a bad, thing. First of all, only self-contradictory practices are true in the deeper sense of the word. And, second, in our contemporary world only art indicates the possibility of revolution as a radical change beyond the horizon of all our present desires and expectations.

Aestheticization and U-Turn

Thus, modern and contemporary art allows us to look at the historical period in which we live from the perspective of its end. The figure of *Angelus Novus* as described by Benjamin is based on the technique of artistic aestheticization as it was practiced by postrevolutionary European art.[6] Here we have the classical description of philosophical metanoia, of reversal of the gaze – *Angelus Novus* turns his back to the future and looks toward the past and present. He still moves into the future – but backwards. The philosophy is impossible without this kind of metanoia, without the reversal of the gaze. Accordingly, the central philosophical question was and still is: How is philosophical metanoia possible? How does the philosopher become able to turn his gaze from the future to the past and to adopt a reflective, truly philosophical attitude towards the world? In older times the answer was given by religion: God (or gods) opened the human spirit to the possibility of leaving the physical world and looking back on it from a metaphysical position. Later, Hegelian philosophy offered another path to metanoia: one could look back if one happened to be present at the end of history – at the moment at which the further progress of the human spirit became impossible. In our postmetaphysical age, the answer was formulated mostly in vitalistic terms: one turns back if one reaches the limits of one’s own strength (Nietzsche), if one’s desire is repressed (Freud), or if one experiences the fear of death or extreme boredom of existence (Heidegger).

But there is no indication of such a personal, existential turning point in Benjamin’s text – only the reference to modern art, to an image by Paul Klee. Benjamin’s *Angelus Novus* turns his back to the future simply because he knows how to do it. He knows it because he learned this technique from modern art – and also from Marinetti. Today, the philosopher does not need any subjective turning point, any real event, any meeting with death or with something or somebody radically Other. Since the French revolution, art has developed techniques for defunctionalizing the status quo, aptly described by the Russian formalists as reduction, zero-device and defamiliarization. In our time the philosopher has only to take a look at modern art and he or she knows what to do. And that is precisely what Benjamin did. Art teaches one how to practice metanoia, a U-turn on the road towards the future, on the road of progress. Not accidentally, Malevich wrote in the copy of his book that he gave to poet Daniil Kharms, ‘Go and stop the progress.’

And philosophy can learn not only horizontal metanoia, the U-turn on the road of progress, but also vertical metanoia: the reversal of upward mobility. In the Christian tradition this reversal was called *kenosis*. In this sense, modern and contemporary art practice can be called *kenotic*.

Indeed, traditionally, we associate art with the movement towards perfection. The artist is supposed to be creative. And to be creative means, of course, to bring into the world not only something new but also something better – better functioning, better looking, more attractive. All of these expectations make sense, but as I have already said, in today’s world all of them are related to design and not to art. Modern and contemporary art wants to make things not better but worse, and not relatively worse, but radically worse – to make dysfunctional things out of functional things, to betray expectations, to demonstrate the invisible presence of death where we tend to see only life.

This is why modern and contemporary art is unpopular. It is so precisely because art goes against the normal way the things are supposed to go. We all are aware of the fact that our civilization is based on inequality, but we tend to think that this inequality can be corrected by upward mobility – by letting people realize their talents, their gifts. In other words, we are ready to protest against the inequality dictated by the existing systems of power, but at the same time we tend to accept the notion of unequal distribution of natural gifts and talents. However, it is obvious that belief in natural gifts and creativity is the worst form of social Darwinism, biologism and, actually, neoliberalism, with its notion of human capital. In his published lecture series *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Michel Foucault stresses that the neoliberal concept of human capital has a utopian dimension – that it is, in fact, the utopian horizon of contemporary capitalism.[7]

As Foucault demonstrates, the individual human being ceases here to be seen merely as a member of the workforce sold on the capitalist market. Instead, he or she becomes the owner of a nonalienated set of qualities, capabilities and skills that are partly hereditary and innate and partly produced by education and care – primarily that provided by the individual's own parents. In other words, we are speaking of an original investment made by nature itself. The world *talent* expresses this relationship between nature and investment well enough – *talent* meaning a gift from nature, and also a certain sum of money. Here the utopian dimension of the neoliberal's 'human capital' becomes clear enough: Participation in the economy loses its character of alienated and alienating work. The human being becomes not only labour but also an asset. And, what is even more important, the notion of human capital, as Foucault shows, erases the opposition between consumer and producer – the opposition that under the standard condition of capitalism, in which man is producer and consumer, threatens to tear the human being apart. Foucault indicates that in terms of human capital the consumer becomes a producer. The consumer produces his or her own satisfaction. And in this way the consumer lets his or her human capital grow.[8]

At the beginning of the 1970s, Joseph Beuys was inspired by the idea of human capital. In his famous Achberger lectures, published under the title ‘Art=Capital’ (*Kunst=Kapital*),[9] he argued that every economic activity should be understood as creative practice – so that everybody becomes an artist. Then the expanded notion of art (*erweiterte Kunstbegriff*) will coincide with the expanded notion of economy (*erweiterte Oekonomiebegriff*). Here Beuys tries to overcome the inequality that for him is symbolized by the difference between creative, artistic work and noncreative, alienated work. To say that everybody is an artist means for Beuys to introduce universal equality by the means of mobilization of those aspects and components of everyone’s human capital that remain hidden, inactivated under standard market conditions. However, during the discussions that followed the lectures it became clear that the attempt by Beuys to base social and economic equality on an equality between artistic and nonartistic activity would not really work. The reason for this is simple enough: According to Beuys, a person is creative because nature originally gave him or her human capital – that is, the capacity to be creative. So art practice remains dependent upon nature – and, thus, upon the unequal distribution of natural gifts.

However, many leftist, socialist theoreticians have fallen under the spell of the idea of upward mobility – be it individual or collective. That can be illustrated by a famous quotation from the end of Leon Trotsky’s book *Literature and Revolution*:

> Social construction and psychophysical self-education will become two aspects of the same process. All the arts – literature, drama, painting, music and architecture – will lend this process beautiful form. Man will become immeasurably stronger, wiser and subtler; his body will become more harmonized, his movement more rhythmic, his voice more musical. The average human type will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx. And above this ridge new peaks will rise.[10]

It is this artistic, social and political alpinism, in its bourgeois and socialist forms, from which modern and contemporary art tries to save us. Modern art is made against the natural gift. It does not develop ‘human potential’ but rather annuls it. It operates not by expansion but by reduction. Indeed, a genuine political transformation cannot be achieved according to the logic of talent, effort and competition on which the current market economy is based, but only through metanoia and kenosis – through the U-turn against the movement of progress, the U-turn against the flow of upward mobility. Only in this way we can escape the pressure of our own gifts and talents, which enslave and exhaust us by pushing us to climb one mountain after the other. Only if we learn to aestheticize the lack of gifts as well as the possession of them, and thus not differentiate between success and failure, can we escape the theoretical blockage that endangers contemporary art activism.

There is no doubt that we are living in a time when everything is aestheticized. This is often interpreted as a sign that we have reached the state after the end of history, or the state of total exhaustion that makes a further historical action impossible. However, as I have tried to show, the nexus between total aestheticization, the end of history and the exhaustion of vital energies is illusory. Using the lessons of modern and contemporary art, we are able to totally aestheticize the world, that is, to see it as being already a corpse, without being necessarily situated at the end of history or at the end of our vital forces. One can aestheticize the world and at the same time act inside it. In fact, total aestheticization does not block, but rather enhances, political action. Total aestheticization means that we see the present status quo as already dead, already abolished. And it means further that every action that is directed towards the stabilization of the status quo will ultimately show itself as ineffective – and every action that is directed towards destruction of the status quo will ultimately succeed. Thus, total aestheticization not only does not preclude political action, it creates an ultimate horizon for successful political action if this action has a revolutionary perspective.

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[1] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000, pp. 90–91.

[2] Filippo Tomasso Marinetti, 'The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism', *Critical Writings*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2006, pp. 11–17

[3] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations*, London: Pimlico 1992.

4 Kazimir Malevich, ‘On the Museum’, *Essays on Art*, vol. 1, New York: G. Wittenborn, 1971, pp. 68–72.

5 Kazimir Malevich, ‘God Is Not Cast Down’, ibid., pp. 188–223.

6 Walter Benjamin, ‘Über den Begriff der Geschichte’, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:2, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag 1974.

7 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics, Lectures at the College de France 1978–1979*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2008, pp. 215ff.

8 Ibid., p. 226.

9 Joseph Beuys, *Achberger Vortraege. Kunst=Kapital*, Achberg: FIU-Verlag 1992.

10 Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, Chicago: Haymarket Books 2005, p. 207.

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CHAPTER 4

Becoming Revolutionary: On Kazimir Malevich

The central question that unavoidably dominates contemporary thinking and speaking about the Russian avant-garde addresses the relationship between artistic revolution and political revolution. Was the Russian avant-garde a collaborator, a coproducer of the October revolution? And if the answer is yes, can the Russian avant-garde function as an inspiration and model for contemporary art practices that attempt to transgress the boundaries of the art world; become political; change the dominating political and economical conditions of human existence; put themselves in the service of political or social revolution, or at least of political and social change?

Today, the political role of art is mostly seen as twofold: It should critique the dominant political, economic, and art system, and, with its utopian promise, it should mobilize the audience to change this system. Now, if we look at the first, prerevolutionary wave of the Russian avant-garde, we do not find its artistic practice fulfilling either of these conditions. To criticize something, one must somehow reproduce it – to present the criticized thing together with the critique. But the Russian avant-garde wanted to be nonmimetic. One can say that Malevich's Suprematist art was revolutionary, but one would hardly be able to say that it was critical. The sound poetry of Alexei Kruchenykh was also nonmimetic and therefore noncritical. These two most radical artistic practices of the Russian avant-garde were also nonparticipatory, because writing sound poetry and painting squares and triangles are obviously not activities that would be especially attractive to a wide audience. For the same reason, these practices could not mobilize the masses for the coming political revolution. In fact, mass mobilization can be achieved only through the use of mass media, such as the press, radio, television, cinema;

pop music and revolutionary design forms such as posters and popular slogans; or mass social media like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. During prerevolutionary times the artists of the Russian avant-garde had, obviously, no access to most of these – even if the scandals that their artistic activities provoked were from time to time covered in the press.

One often speaks about the Russian revolutionary avant-garde, meaning Russian avant-garde artistic practices of the 1920s. But in fact the term is incorrect, because in the 1920s the Russian avant-garde was artistically and politically already in its postrevolutionary phase. First, it had developed further the artistic practices that emerged before the October revolution. And second, it was practicing in the framework of the postrevolutionary Soviet state – as it was formed after the October revolution and the end of the Civil War – and it was being supported and controlled by this state. One cannot speak of the Russian avant-garde in Soviet times as being revolutionary in the usual sense of this word, then, because the Russian avant-garde art was not directed against the status quo, against the dominating political and economic power structures. The Russian avant-garde of the Soviet period was not critical but affirmative in its attitude towards the postrevolutionary Soviet state and the postrevolutionary status quo. It was basically a conformist art. Thus, only the Russian prerevolutionary avant-garde can be regarded today as being relevant to our contemporary situation – a situation obviously not analogous to the situation after the socialist revolution. So in speaking about the revolutionary character of the Russian avant-garde, let us concentrate on the figure of Kazimir Malevich, as the most radical representative of that avant-garde's prerevolutionary phase.

As I have said, one does not find in the art of the prerevolutionary Russian avant-garde, including the art of Malevich, the characteristics that we tend to look for today when we speak about critical, politically engaged art that is able to mobilize the masses for the revolution – and thus help to change the world. The suspicion arises that Malevich's famous painting *Black Square* is unrelated to any political or social revolution – that we have to do here with an artistic gesture that ultimately has its relevance only inside the artistic space. However, I would argue that although *Black Square* was not an active revolutionary gesture in the sense that it explicitly criticized the political status quo or advertised a coming revolution, it was revolutionary in a much deeper sense. Then what is revolution? It is not the process of building of a new society – this is the goal of the postrevolutionary period – but rather, a radical destruction of the existing society. Accepting this revolutionary destruction is not an easy psychological process. We tend to resist the radical forces of destruction, we tend to be compassionate and nostalgic toward our past, and maybe even more so towards our endangered present. Now the Russian avant-garde – like the early European avant-garde in general – offered the strongest possible medicine against any kind of compassion or nostalgia. It accepted the total destruction of all traditions of European and Russian culture – traditions that were dear not only to the educated classes but also to the general population.

Malevich's *Black Square* was the most radical gesture of this acceptance. It announced the death of any cultural nostalgia, of any sentimental attachment to the culture of the past. *Black Square* was like an open window through which the revolutionary spirits of radical destruction could enter the space of culture and reduce it to ashes. Indeed, a good example of Malevich's own antinostalgic attitude can be found in his short but important text 'On the Museum', from 1919. At that time the new Soviet government feared that the old Russian museums and art collections would be destroyed by civil war and the general collapse of state institutions and the economy. The Communist Party responded by trying to secure and save these collections. In his essay, Malevich protested against this pro-museum policy by calling on the Soviet state to not intervene on behalf of the old art collections, because their destruction could open the path to true, living art:

> Life knows what it is doing, and if it is striving to destroy one must not interfere, since by hindering we are blocking the path to a new conception of life that is born within us. In burning a corpse we obtain one gram of powder: accordingly thousands of graveyards could be accommodated on a single chemist's shelf. We can make a concession to conservatives by offering that they burn all past epochs, since they are dead, and set up one pharmacy.

Later, Malevich gives a concrete example of what he means:

> The aim (of this pharmacy) will be the same, even if people will examine the powder from Rubens and all his art – a mass of ideas will arise in people, and will be often more alive than actual representation (and take up less room).

Thus, Malevich proposes not to keep, not to save things that must go, but rather to let them go without sentimentality or remorse. To let the dead bury their dead. This radical acceptance of the destructive work of time seems at first glance to be nihilistic. Malevich himself described his art as being based on nothingness. But in fact, at the core of this unsentimental attitude toward the art of the past lies faith in the indestructible character of art. The avant-garde of the first wave let the things – including things of art – go because it believed that something always remains. And it looked for the things that remain beyond any human attempt at conservation.

The avant-garde is often associated with the notion of progress, especially technological progress. Yet the avant-garde asked the following question: How could art continue under the permanent destruction of cultural tradition and the familiar world that is a characteristic condition of the modern age, with its technological, political and social revolutions? Or, to put it in different terms: How can art resist the destructiveness of progress? How does one make art that will escape permanent change – art that is atemporal, transhistorical? The avant-garde did not want to create an art of the future – it wanted to create a transtemporal art, an art for all time. Time and again one hears and reads that we need change, that our goal – including our goal in art – should be to change the status quo. But the change *is* our status quo. Permanent change *is* our only reality. We are living in the prison of permanent change. To change the status quo, we would have to change change, escape from the prison of change. True faith in the revolution, paradoxically – or maybe not so paradoxically – presupposes the belief that revolution is not capable of total destruction, that something always survives even the most radical historical catastrophe. Only such a belief makes possible the unreserved acceptance of revolution that was so characteristic of the Russian avant-garde.

In his writings, Malevich often speaks of materialism as the ultimate horizon of his thinking and art. Materialism means for Malevich the impossibility of stabilizing any image during historical change. Time and again Malevich contends that there is no isolated, secured metaphysical or spiritual space that could serve as a repository of images that would immunize them from the destructive forces operating in the material world. The fate of art cannot be different from the fate of every other thing. The common reality is disfiguration, dissolution and disappearance in the flow of material forces and uncontrollable material processes. Taking this view, Malevich time and again describes the history of new art – from Cezanne, Cubism, and Futurism up to his own Suprematism – as a history of progressive disfiguration and destruction of the traditional image as it was born in ancient Greece and developed through religious art and the Renaissance. A new question arises: What can survive this work of permanent destruction?

Malevich's answer is immediately plausible: The image that survives the work of destruction is the image of destruction. Malevich undertakes the most radical reduction of the image (up to his *Black Square*) that anticipates the most radical destruction of the traditional image by material forces, by the power of time. Malevich welcomed any destruction of art – past, present or future – because this act of destruction would necessarily produce an image of destruction. And destruction cannot destroy its own image. Of course, God could destroy the world without leaving a trace, because God created it out of nothingness. But if God is dead, then an act of destruction that leaves no visible trace, no image of destruction, is impossible. And through the act of radical artistic reduction, this image of coming destruction can be anticipated here and now – in an image that is anti-messianic because it demonstrates that the end of time will never come, that material forces will be never stopped by any divine, transcendental, metaphysical power. The death of God means that no image can be completely stabilized – but it also means that no image can be totally destroyed.

But what happened to the reductionist images of the early avant-garde after the victory of the October revolution, under the conditions of the postrevolutionary state? Actually, any postrevolutionary situation is a deeply paradoxical one, because any attempt to continue the revolutionary impulse, to remain committed and faithful to the revolutionary event, leads us necessarily into the danger of betraying the revolution. The continuation of the revolution could be understood as its permanent radicalization, as its repetition, or as permanent revolution. But repetition of the revolution in the postrevolutionary state could at the same time be easily understood as counter-revolution – as an act of weakening and destabilizing the revolution's achievements. On the other hand, the stabilization of the postrevolutionary order can just as easily be interpreted as a betrayal of the revolution, because postrevolutionary stabilization unavoidably revives traditional, prerevolutionary norms of stability and order. To live in this paradox becomes, as we know, a true adventure, one that historically only a few revolutionary politicians have survived.

The project of continuing the artistic revolution is no less paradoxical. What does it mean to continue the avant-garde? To go on repeating the forms of avant-garde art? Following such a strategy, one can easily be accused of valuing the letter of artistic revolution over its spirit, of turning a revolutionary form into a pure decoration of power – or into a commodity. On the other hand, the rejection of avant-garde artistic forms in the name of a new artistic revolution immediately leads to an artistic counter-revolution – as we saw happen with so-called postmodern art. The second wave of the Russian avant-garde tried to avoid this paradox by redefining the operation of reduction.

For the first wave of the avant-garde, and especially for Malevich, the operation of reduction served as a demonstration of the indestructibility of art. Or, to put it in other words, as a demonstration of the indestructibility of the material world, as every destruction is a material destruction and therefore leaves traces. There is no fire without ashes – that is, there is no divine fire of total annihilation. The black square remains nontransparent because the material is nontransparent. The early avant-garde artists, being radically materialistic, never believed in the possibility of a fully transparent, immaterial medium (such as soul, or faith, or reason) that would allow us to see the ‘other world’ once everything material that allegedly obscures this other world had been removed by the apocalyptic event. According to the avant-garde, the only thing that we will be able to see then will be the apocalyptic event itself, which would look like a reductionist avant-garde artwork.

The second wave of the Russian avant-garde used the operation of reduction in a completely different way. For these artists, the revolutionary removal of the ancient, prerevolutionary order was an event that had opened to the view a new, Soviet, postrevolutionary, post-apocalyptic order. Instead of an image of reduction itself, they saw the new world that could be built after the act of reducing the old world had been effectuated. Thus, the operation of reduction became a way of praising the new Soviet reality. At the beginning of their activities, these Constructivists believed they could manage the ‘things themselves’ that they found to be directly accessible after the reduction, the removal of the old images that had separated them from these things. In his programmatic essay ‘Constructivism’, Alexei Gan wrote:

> Not to reflect, not to represent and not to interpret reality, but to really build and express the systematic tasks of the new class, the proletariat … Especially now, when the proletarian revolution has been victorious, and its destructive, creative movement is progressing along the iron rails into culture, which is organized according to a grand plan of social production, everyone – the master of colour and line, the builder of space-volume forms and the organizer of mass productions – must all become constructors in the general work of the arming and moving of the many-millioned human masses.[1]

But later, Nikolai Tarabukin asserted in his famous essay ‘From the Easel to the Machine’ that the Constructivist artist could not play a formative role in the process of actual social production. His role was rather that of a propagandist who defends and praises the beauty of industrial production and opens the public’s eyes to this beauty. Socialist industry as a whole, without any additional artistic intervention, has already shown itself as good and beautiful because it is an effect of radical reduction of everything ‘unnecessary’, including not only luxury consumption, but also the consuming classes. As Tarabukin writes, the communist society is already a nonobjective work of art because it does not have any goal beyond itself. In a certain sense the Constructivists are repeating here the gesture of the first Christian icon painters, who believed that after the demise of the old pagan world they were beginning to be able to uncover the celestial things and to see and depict them as they truly are.

This comparison was famously drawn by Malevich in his treatise ‘God Is Not Cast Down’, written in the same year, 1919, as his essay on the museum, but in this treatise his polemic is directed not against the conservative lovers of the past but against the Constructivist builders of the future. Malevich states that belief in the continuous perfectioning of the human condition through industrial progress is of the same order as the Christian belief in the continuous perfectioning of the human soul. Both Christianity and communism believe in the possibility of reaching ultimate perfection, whether that is the Kingdom of God or a communist utopia. Malevich begins to develop a certain line of argument that it seems to me, perfectly describes the situation of modern and contemporary art vis à vis the modern revolutionary project and contemporary attempts to politicize art. In his later writings Malevich returns time and again to this line of argument – which is too complex to describe fully but which I summarize below.

The dialectics that Malevich develops in this essay can be characterized as a dialectics of imperfection. As I have already said, Malevich defines both religion and modern technology, or factory, as he calls it, as a striving for perfection: perfection of the individual soul in the case of religion and perfection of the material world in the case of the factory. According to Malevich, neither project can be realized, because realization would require from an individual human being and from humanity as a whole an investment of infinite time, energy and effort. But humans are mortal. Their time and energy are finite. And this finitude of human existence prevents humanity from achieving any kind of perfection – spiritual or technical. As a mortal being, man is doomed to remain forever imperfect. Priests and engineers, according to Malevich, are not capable of opening this infinite horizon of imperfection because they cannot abandon their pursuit of perfection – cannot relax, cannot accept failure as their true fate. However, artists can. They know that their bodies, their vision and their art are not and cannot be truly perfect and healthy. They know themselves to be infected by the bacilli of change, illness and death, as Malevich describes it in his later text 'An Introduction to the Theory of the Additional Element in Painting', which concerned itself with the problems of art education.[2] Malevich describes a range of art styles – 'Cézannism', Cubism and Suprematism among them – as the effects of different aesthetic infections. So Malevich compares the straight lines of Suprematism (which he introduced into painting, according to his own view) to the bacillus of tuberculosis, an organic form that is also rectilinear.[3] Just as a bacillus modifies the body, novel visual elements introduced into the world by new technical and social developments modify the sensibility and nervous system of the artist. The artist 'catches' them – along with the same feeling of risk and danger. Of course, when somebody becomes ill, you call a doctor. But Malevich thinks that the role of the artist is different from that of the doctor or the technician, trained as they are to remove deficiencies and malfunctions, to restore the integrity of the failing body or a failing machine. Instead, Malevich's model for artists and for the teaching of art follows the trope of biological evolution: Artists need to modify the immune system of their art in order to incorporate new aesthetic bacilli, to survive them and find a new inner balance, a new definition of health.

In his influential text 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde', Jean-François Lyotard writes that modernist art reflects an extreme state of insecurity, which is a consequence of artists rejecting the help that art schools can offer – all the programmes, methods and techniques that allow the artist to work professionally – and remaining alone.[4] For Lyotard, life is within the artist, and it is this inner life that begins to manifest itself after all the external conventions of art are removed. But the conviction that the artist rejects school in order to become sincere, to be able to manifest his or her inner self, is one of the oldest myths of modernism – the myth in which avant-garde art is an authentic creation in opposition to the mere reproduction of the past, of the given.

Malevich made a different claim, one that has proved far more in keeping with contemporary art: ‘Only dull and powerless artists defend their art by reference to sincerity.’[5] Similarly, Marcel Broodthaers declared that he became an artist in an attempt to become insincere. To be sincere means precisely to remain repetitive, to reproduce one’s own already existing taste, to deal with one’s own already existing identity. Instead, radical modern art proposed that artists get themselves infected with exteriority, become sick through the contagions of the outside world, and become outsiders to themselves. Malevich believed that the artist should become infected through technique. Broodthaers let himself become infected by the economics of the art market and by the conventions of the art museum.

Modernism is a history of infections: by political movements; by mass culture and consumerism; and now by the Internet, information technology, and interactivity. The openness to exteriority and its infections is an essential characteristic of the modernist inheritance, and that inheritance is the will to reveal the Other within oneself, to become Other, to become infected by Otherness. From Flaubert, Baudelaire and Dostoyevsky, by way of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, to Bataille, Foucault, and Deleuze, modern artistic thought has acknowledged as a manifestation of the human much of what was previously considered evil, cruel, and inhuman. The goal of these artists was not to incorporate, integrate, include or assimilate the others into their own world but, conversely, to become alien to their own tradition. They manifested an inner solidarity with the Other, with the alien, even with the threatening and cruel, and thus took them much further than a simple concept of tolerance. Indeed, this is not so much a strategy of tolerance and inclusion as a strategy of self-exclusion – of presenting oneself as infected and infectious, as being the embodiment of the dangerous or the intolerant. While much contemporary art today, with its focus on the agency of community, seems to have the very opposite strategy, in fact the dissolution of the artist's self in the crowd is an act of self-infection with the bacilli of the social. It is precisely this self-infection by art that must go on if we don't want to let the bacilli of art die.

Artists, according to Malevich, should not immunize themselves against these bacilli, but on the contrary accept them and let them to destroy the old, traditional art patterns. The body of the artist may die, but the bacilli survive that death – and begin to infect the bodies of other artists. That is why Malevich actually believes in the transhistorical character of art. Art is material and materialist. And that means that art can always survive the end of all the purely idealist, metaphysical projects – whether Kingdom of God or Communism. The movement of material forces is nonteleological. As such, it cannot reach its telos and come to an end. This movement produces permanent destruction of all the finite projects and achievements.

The artist accepts this infinite violence of the material flow and appropriates it, lets himself be infected by it. Then he lets this violence infect, destroy, make his own art ill. In our time Malevich is often accused of having allowed his art to be infected by the bacilli of figuration and even Socialist Realism during the Soviet period of his artistic practice. But Malevich's writings from the same period explain his ambiguous attitude towards the social, political and artistic developments of his time: He did not invest in them any hope, any expectation of progress (that is also characteristic of his reaction to film), but at the same time he accepted them as a necessary illness of the time – and was ready to become infected, imperfect, transitory. In fact, already his Suprematist images were imperfect, flowing, nonconstructive – especially, if we compare them to, let us say, Mondrian's paintings. Thus Malevich shows us what it means to be a revolutionary artist: It means to join the universal material flow that destroys all the temporary political and aesthetic orders. Here the goal is not change – understood as a change from the existing, 'bad' order to a new, 'good' order. Rather, radical and revolutionary art abandons all goals, and enters the nonteleological, potentially infinite process that the artist cannot and does not want to bring to an end.

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[1] Alexei Gan, ‘Constructivism’, in Camilla Gray, *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863–1922*, London: Thames and Hudson 1962, p. 286.

[2] Kazimir Malevich, *Essays on Art*, vol. 1, New York: George Wittenborn 1971, pp. 147ff.

[3] Malevich, p. 167.

[4] Jean-Francois Lyotard, ‘The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,’ *Artforum*, April 1984, pp. 36–43.

[5] Kazimir Malevich, ‘Ot kubizma i futurisma k suprematizmu’, *Sobranie sochineniy*, vol. 1 Moskva: Gileya 1995, p. 35.

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CHAPTER 5

Installing Communism

The word *communism* is usually associated with the word *utopia*. Utopia is a place that is not inscribed in any ‘real’ topography and can be reached only by way of the imagination. However, utopia is not a pure fantasy. It is a no-place that has the potential to become a place. Not accidentally, one speaks so often about the idea of communism or the communist project, meaning something nonreal but capable of being realized. Thus, even though it remains an ‘idea’ or a ‘project’, communism has a certain reality – its own here and now. Formulation of a certain idea or project presupposes a certain ‘real’ scene in which this formulation takes shape – certain political, social, medial and technical conditions that make it possible to produce, manifest and distribute this idea in a book, film, image, Web site or other ‘material’ form. That means that utopia has always already had its place in the world. The utopian imagination always presupposes a certain ‘real space’ – a functioning place for a work of utopian imagination. And this space is not something that the same imagination can create anew. The scene of the utopian imagination is part of the topology of the world as it already is. This is something that Karl Marx permanently stresses in his polemics against socialist utopianism – especially, French socialist utopianism, which tended to be blind to the economic, social and political conditions of its own possibility. Marxist materialism is nothing other than the thematization of the real, material conditions of ‘immaterial’ imagination and the demonstration of the unconscious dependency of this imagination on the conditions of its production and distribution.

This dependency becomes even more obvious when one begins not only to imagine but also to build communism, as it was the case in the socialist countries of Eastern Europe. Here, the scene of the communist imagination becomes even more visible. And the contrast between communist utopia and the scene of its building also becomes obvious. Today, one is confronted time and again with the opinion that Eastern European communism (or socialism) was not communism (or socialism) at all. This is obviously true. But the Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries understood themselves not as places of communism but as places where communism was being built. And a building site, of course, always looks different from the final construction. The building site of the Egyptian pyramids was probably different from the pyramids themselves as we see them today. And the lifestyle of the Western intellectuals that imagine and preach today the ‘idea of communism’ does not look very utopian. Can this fact discredit the idea of communism itself? Probably not. But then how can the real experience of the building of communism in Eastern Europe be accused of not being the experience of communism at all? This is not quite clear.

It becomes even less clear if we ask ourselves what our idea of a communist society is. Here again, Marx was very ironic about any attempts of the French and English utopian socialists of his time to describe the communist society in every detail. If communism is a utopia, it is indescribable, because utopia, being no-place, cannot have any definite form. Every attempt to describe communism necessarily functions as a projection of the personal prejudices, phobias and obsessions of the writer or artist who tries to undertake such a description.

According to Marx, communism may be realized when the development of the productive forces changes our life in an as yet not fully predictable way. Being a communist means for Marx not fixing one's gaze on a vision of the communist future, but rather looking attentively at the scene of one's own imagination and analyzing its dependence on the realities of this scene. This requirement that we shift our gaze from the utopian vision to its real context becomes especially explicit when Marx discusses the 'idealistic' discourses on art. Indeed, utopian imagination is a specific kind of artistic imagination. The romantic, 'idealistic' understanding of art interprets the artistic imagination as a break with reality, as a way of fleeing reality and imagining a new world that offers an alternative to the world as it is. It is not that Marx denies the possibility of such a free flight of imagination away from reality. Rather, he asks about the real conditions that make such a flight possible – and even necessary.

In the famous paragraphs of their unpublished treatise *A Critique of the German Ideology* that Marx and Engels dedicate to criticizing Max Stirner's book *The Ego and Its Own*, one finds the following passage on the theory of artistic labour:

> Here, as always, Sancho [Sancho is a nickname Marx and Engels gave to Max Stirner] is again unlucky with his practical examples. He thinks 'no one can compose your music for you, complete the sketches for your paintings. No one can do Raphael's works for him.' Sancho would surely have known, however, that it was not Mozart himself but someone else who composed the greater part of Mozart's *Requiem* and finished it, and that Raphael himself 'completed' only an insignificant part of his own frescoes.
>
> He imagines that the so-called organizers of labour wanted to organize the entire activity of each individual, and yet it is precisely they who distinguish between directly productive labour, which has to be organized, and labour which is not directly productive. In regard to the latter, however, it was not their [the communists'] view, as Sancho imagines, that each should do the work of Raphael, but that anyone in 'whom there is a potential Raphael should be able to develop without hindrance.' Sancho imagines that Raphael produced his pictures independently of the division of labour that existed in Rome at the time. If he were to compare Raphael with Leonardo da Vinci and Titian, he would see how greatly Raphael's works of art depended on the flourishing of Rome at that time, which occurred under Florentine influence, while the works of Leonardo depended on the state of things in Florence, and the works of Titian, at a later period, depended on the totally different development of Venice. Raphael as much as any other artist was determined by the technical advances in art made before him, by the organization of society and the division of labour in his locality, and, finally, by the division of labour in all the countries with which his locality had intercourse. Whether an individual like Raphael succeeds in developing his talent depends wholly on demand, which in turn depends on the division of labour and the conditions of human culture resulting from it.

And they write further:

> In proclaiming the uniqueness of work in science and art, Stirner adopts a position far inferior to that of the bourgeoisie. At the present time it has already been found necessary to organize this 'unique' activity. Horace Vernet would not have had time to paint even a tenth part of his pictures if he had regarded them as works which 'only this unique person is capable of producing'. In Paris, the great demand for vaudevilles and novels brought about the organization of work for their production; this organization at any rate yields something better than its 'unique' competitors in Germany.

But Marx and Engels also cautioned,

> Incidentally, it is self-evident that all these organizations based on modern division of labour still lead to extremely limited results, and they represent a step forward only compared with the previous narrow isolation.[1]

I quote these lengthy passages from the 'German Ideology' because in them Marx and Engels required and predicted a shift from the contemplation of individual artworks towards a reflection on the context of their production, distribution, success with the public, etc. – the shift that, indeed, took place in the twentieth century in art theory and in art itself. Indeed, the fate of art is dependent on a certain stage of technical development (art being originally a *techne*, after all), the economic conditions under which the art is produced, and the taste of the public, which is formed by the public's lifestyle. Today, within art practice itself, this new awareness of context is manifested in a shift away from the production of individual artworks towards the creation of artistic installations in which the organizational presuppositions of the artistic practice can be thematized. Thus, one can argue that Marxist art – if such a thing is possible – can only be the art of installation. I speak here of course not about the kind of immersive installations that try to overwhelm the spectator by aesthetically attacking him or her from all sides. (We have experienced many such immersive installations in the past few decades.) Rather, I speak about the installations – artistic or curatorial – that are designed to reflect on the contexts of art production and function.

Not accidentally, this shift from the artwork to the installation occurred in the Soviet Union earlier than in many other places. And also not accidentally, it occurred originally in the context of the radical Russian avant-garde, and especially its most radical, Suprematist version. Here it is important to mention that the early artistic practice of Malevich was in many ways inspired by Stirner. In the early texts by Malevich, one can easily discover the influence of the author of *The Ego and Its Own*. Thus, Malevich insists that achieving 'nothing' or, rather, 'nothingness' is the true goal of his art. In one of his programmatic texts he writes, 'Kubofuturists have collected all the things on a square, broken them – but not burned them. It is a pity!'[2] And further, 'But I transformed myself into the zero of forms and came out of 0 – 1.'[3] These statements remind me very strongly (in their content and also their rhythmical structure) of the famous formulations by Stirner: 'All things are nothing to me'[4] and 'I, this nothing, shall put forth my creations from myself'.[5] For Malevich, as for Stirner, the discovery of one's own uniqueness in the world is a result of radical negation of all the cultural, economic, political and social traditions, conventions and restraints. That is, one discovers oneself as pure nothingness, a point of emptiness inside the fullness of the world – an active emptiness that devours the world, destroys, consumes and annihilates all things, turning everything into nothing. Stirner's 'unique individual' (*der Einzige*) comes to himself through liberation from all the goals, principles and ideals that previously connected him to others. According to Stirner this unique individual does not understand himself anymore as a subject of reason and ethics, as a worker or even as man, as a human being. Ultimately, Stirner's hero is an artist realizing his or her unique presence in the world by 'unproductive', non- or even anti-economical artistic work that is equal to pure negation. This understanding of the role of the artist was shared by Malevich: He called his own art 'nonobjective' not only because it excluded any references to the 'real objects' but also – and maybe primarily – because his art had no goal, no objective beyond itself. One should not forget that Malevich stood politically very close to the Russian anarchist movement – and even after the October revolution he regularly published his articles in the newspaper *Anarkhia*.[6] At that time Max Stirner was the must- read writer in Russian anarchist circles. Here the artistic views of Malevich fully correspond to his political views. One can even speculate that his famous *Black Square* refers to the black flag of the anarchist movement.

Suprematism is the best example of 'nonorganized' or 'not directly productive' work. It rejected all the formal criteria of professional art and the social demands that were connected to these criteria. That is why Suprematism could and still can serve as the best starting point for a Marxist reflection on the dependence of art on its social, economic and political context. For the same reason, Marx and Engels use *The Ego and Its Own* as the focal point for their discussion of the unconscious, unreflected dependence of the 'unique individual' on the material, technical conditions of his activity, including his artistic practice. Only if an individual completely rejects all the explicit forms of dependence on the cultural, ideological and political values that dominate that individual's society can he or she develop a discourse that would thematize his hidden, unconscious, implicit dependence on the technical, material and political context of his existence – including the context of his act of self-liberation. Only if an individual becomes 'nothingness' does the context of his existence become transparent, visible. The reduction of the artwork to nothingness, to emptiness, to point zero opens the gaze of its spectator to the artwork's context. As we know, the concept of installation was introduced by Michael Fried, in the framework of his analysis of the art of the American Minimalists, especially that of Donald Judd.[7] Fried contends that the extreme reduction of the artwork that was practiced by the Minimalists reoriented the gaze of the spectator from the artwork itself to its context, understood by Fried as the scene of its display. That could be an exhibition space or a natural landscape. To characterize this shift of gaze, Fried used the notion of installation. In other words, Fried registered correctly – if also with a critical intention – the reorientation of the gaze from the artwork reduced to nothingness towards the world in which this nothingness emerges. But even if American Minimalism repeats the Suprematist gesture of reduction (and Judd's writings on Malevich confirm this), Minimalism at the same time objectifies and naturalizes Suprematist nothingness – by placing, as Fried rightly states, the minimalist object inside the natural landscape. Such a renaturalization of nothingness does, of course, run against the Suprematist programme. For Malevich, Suprematism means an irrevocable break with everything natural. The black square is an image of this break. And because of this break a new transparency is created. After and through the emergence of this new transparency, something comes to be seen that was never seen before – something that had been hidden by the fullness of the world. The emergence of the black square does not mean the reorientation of the gaze to the already existing, naturally given outside of the black square, as Fried describes it. Rather, it allows an insight inside and behind the black square, towards the hidden stage of its emergence. The self-nullification of the individual, including of the artist, always presupposes a certain stage on which that nullification takes place. It is precisely this stage that Marx and Engels try to describe and contemporary art tries to reveal.

In the following paragraphs I will show that both leading protagonists of Russian installation art, El Lissitzky and Ilya Kabakov, used *Black Square* as the starting point of their artistic practice. These two artists have, so to speak, gone through the black square and made visible a space that was hidden behind it. In fact, during a later period of his life Malevich himself had to accept the existence of the invisible – or, rather, necessarily overlooked – determinations of his artistic practice and artistic practice in general. In his famous text on the additional element in the painting, Malevich speaks about bacilli that infect the artistic vision in an unconscious way.[8] Infection of art by the outside world remains, even when the visibility of this world is reduced to nothingness. Malevich praises this unconscious infection through the outside world for making artistic practice contemporary with the reality in which the practice takes place. Now, Lissitzky and Kabakov go much further in visualizing the infectious context that is covered up and at the same time indicated by *Black Square*. But they do that in very different ways. One can argue that this difference is not accidental or dictated solely by the individual temperaments of these two artists, but rather that it reflects the ambivalent relationship between life and art under the specific conditions of the Soviet regime and, to an even greater extent they reflect the ambiguity of the installation as an art form.

As I have said, the installation can be seen as an attempt to overcome the autonomous, sovereigntist attitude of modernist art by revealing its 'realistic', materialist context. Indeed, the freedom of the artist to create art according to his or her own sovereign will does not guarantee that the artist's work will also be exhibited in the public space. The inclusion of any artwork in a public exhibition must be – at least potentially – publicly explicable and justifiable. Though artist, curator and art critic are free to argue for or against the inclusion of some artworks, every such explanation or justification undermines the autonomous, sovereign character of artistic freedom that modernist art aspired to win. This is why the curator – being the most visible representative of an art institution – is seen as someone who keeps coming between the artwork and the viewer, disempowering both. Now, the artistic installation can be seen as a space in which to explore the dependence of the artist on the art institution in general and on curatorial strategies in particular. But at the same time, the emergence of the artistic installation can be also seen as an act of self-empowerment by the artist, as an expansion of his sovereigntist attitude from the artwork to the art space itself – in other words, from the artwork to its context.

The artistic installation is often viewed today as a form that allows the artist to democratize his or her art, to take public responsibility for it, to begin to act in the name of a certain community or even of society as a whole. Thus, the artist's decision to allow the multitude of visitors to enter the space of the artwork can be interpreted as an opening up of the closed space of an artwork to democracy. The enclosed space then seems to be transformed into a platform for public discussion, democratic practice, communication, networking, education and so forth. But this analysis of installation art practice tends to overlook the symbolic act of privatizing a public exhibition space that precedes the act of opening the installation to a community of visitors. For the space of the traditional exhibition is a symbolic public property, and the curator who manages this space acts in the name of public opinion. The visitor to a typical exhibition remains in his or her own territory, symbolic owner of the space where the artworks are delivered to his or her gaze and judgement. But the space of an artistic installation is the symbolic private property of the artist. By entering it, the visitor leaves the public territory of democratic legitimacy and enters a space of sovereign, authoritarian control. The visitor is on foreign ground, an expatriate who must submit to a foreign law – the law laid down by the artist. The artist is not only sovereign but also legislator of the installation space, even – or maybe especially – if the law given by the artist to a community of visitors is a democratic one.

One might then say that installation practice reveals the act of unconditional, sovereign violence that initially installs any political order, including a democratic one. We know that democratic order is never brought about in a democratic fashion; it always emerges as a result of a violent revolution. To make a law is to break one. The first legislator can never act in a legitimate manner. The one who installs the political order does not belong to it, remaining external to it even if he or she decides later to submit to it. The author of an artistic installation is also such a legislator, who gives to the community of visitors the space in which to constitute itself, and defines the rules to which this community must submit, but does so without belonging to this community, remaining outside it. This is true even if the artist decides to join the community that he or she has created. This second step never leads us to forget the first one – the sovereign one. In his book *The Concept of the Political*,[9] Carl Schmitt thematizes the 'state of exception' (*Ausnahmezustand*) – an event that reveals the sovereign power hidden behind the constitutional order. Since then and for many theoreticians, especially for Giorgio Agamben, the 'state of exception' has been an important starting point for investigating the hidden conditions of the modern constitutional and democratic order. In this sense one can say that the artistic installation is also a 'space of exception'. It isolates a specific space from the topology of the 'normal' world to reveal its inner conditions and determinations.

The Soviet authorities never tried to conceal their sovereign character – and drew a contrast between their 'honesty' and the 'hypocrisy' of the bourgeois world. Under Soviet conditions, the creative freedom of the sovereign, whether Stalin or, later, the Communist Party, was always made explicit. Marxism, like installation art, can be interpreted in two different ways. One can read the Marxist requirement that we shift our attention from 'subjective' philosophical thinking to its economic and political context as an appeal to us to critically investigate the powers that shape and control this context. This understanding of Marxism as a critical project finds its reflection in so-called critical art. But Marxism can also be understood as an appeal to transform the context of reality instead of simply critically interpreting it. Soviet communism emerged as a consequence of the second, revolutionary and sovereigntist reading of Marxism. One can say that the Soviet Union as a whole was shaped as a kind of artistic installation – an artwork the boundaries of which coincided with the borders of Soviet territory. On this territory the sovereign, creative, artistic freedom of formation and transformation had an obvious priority with regard to democratic freedom of discussion: the population of the Soviet Union was from the beginning inscribed into the artistic space in which it lived and moved. Thus, an artistic reflection of the Soviet condition could take two different forms. It could draw a parallel between the sovereign, creative freedom at the core of the Soviet experiment and the creative freedom of the artist as author of an installation that reflected this freedom and at the same time participated in it. Or, it could critically reflect on the reification of this creative freedom after it was officially and institutionally installed by the Soviet authorities and took a certain definite form. One can argue that Lissitzky embraced the first possibility and Kabakov the second, critical one.

Let us begin with an analysis of Lissitzky's work. Lissitzky saw Suprematism as crossing the point zero of the old world towards the free creation of the new world. This idea is reflected in the title of the exhibition in which Malevich first showed his *Black Square* and other Suprematist works: '0.10'. The show had 10 participating artists, who had all gone through point zero – through nothingness and death. Lissitzky saw himself as another such artist, and he believed that on the other side of zero (or, one might say, the other side of the mirror) one could create a new, completely artificial space and world of forms.[10] This belief was an effect of the October revolution. It seemed to many artists and theoreticians of that time that Russian reality itself – including all its explicit and implicit contexts – had been completely nullified by the revolution. Russian reality went the same way that Suprematism had gone before it. There was no context for life or for art left intact. There was nothing to see through the black square, through the gap that was created by the break with nature and historical past. Art had to create its own context – the social and economic presuppositions for its own further functioning. In a language strongly reminiscent of Stirner's as it was criticized by Marx and Engels, Lissitzky contrasts communism, understood by him as the domination of organized, regulated labour, with Suprematism, understood as the domination of creative, unregulated, unorganized labour – and he expresses his conviction that in the future communism will be left behind by Suprematism, because creativity moves faster and functions more efficiently than regular work.[11] However, Lissitzky understands unorganized labour in a different way from Marx and Engels. For Lissitzky, as for Russian Constructivists in general, unorganized labour is precisely the work of organization. The artist is not organized because he is an organizer. Specifically, the artist creates the space in which organized, productive labour takes place.

In a certain sense, Soviet artists had no other choice at the time than to forward such a total claim. The market, including the art market, had been eliminated by the Communists. Artists were no longer confronted by private consumers and their aesthetic preferences, but by the state as a whole. Thus, for the artists it was all or nothing. However, already at the beginning of the 1920s Nikolai Tarabukin asserted in his then famous essay 'From the Easel to the Machine' that the Constructivist artist could not play a formative role in the process of actual social production. His role was rather that of a propagandist who defends and praises the beauty of industrial production and opens the public's eyes to this beauty.[12] The artist, as described by Tarabukin, is someone who looks at the entirety of socialist production as a thing ready-made – a kind of socialist Duchamp who exhibits the whole of socialist industry as something good and beautiful.

One can argue that such was precisely the strategy of Lissitzky in the late period of his artistic activity, when he was concentrating more and more of his efforts on the production of various kinds of exhibitions. In these exhibitions he tried to visualize the sociopolitical space in which organized Soviet production took place. Or, in other words, he tried to make visible the organizational work that otherwise would remain hidden, invisible to the external spectator. To visualize the invisible is traditionally the main goal of art. Obviously, Lissitzky understood his exhibitions as spaces constructed by the curator-author – spaces in which the attention of the spectator was shifted from the exhibited objects to the organization of the exhibition space as such. In this respect, Lissitzky speaks about a difference between 'passive' and 'active' exhibitions – or, as we would say today, between traditional exhibitions and installations. For Lissitzky, passive exhibitions can only demonstrate what has been done before. In contrast, active exhibitions create the completely new spaces in which the general idea of the exhibition is embodied – and in which individual items play a subsidiary role.[13] Thus, Lissitzky argues that an exhibition of Soviet architecture must be in itself an embodiment of Sovietness in architecture, and all the elements of the exhibition, including its space, light etc., should be subjugated to this goal. In other words, Lissitzky sees himself as the creator of an exhibition space that functions as an extension and realization of his earlier 'projects for establishing the new' (*proyekty utverzhdeniya novogo*, or PROUNS). The exhibition space becomes not quite a utopian, but – to use the term introduced by Michel Foucault – a heterotopian space. The 'active exhibition' must not merely illustrate and reproduce the development of the socialist reality and socialist labour that creates a new society, but rather offer a project for designing Soviet reality in its totality. On the one hand, the organizational work by the Communist Party is reconstructed and praised. On the other hand, Lissitzky aesthetically integrates the representation of the organized Communist work into the Suprematist design of the installation space.

Here Lissitzky finds himself in competition with the 'active exhibitions' that were mounted in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow) and the Russian Museum in Leningrad in the years 1931–32 by the Marxist art theoreticians Alexei Fedorov-Davydov and Nikolai Punin. These bore such characteristic titles as 'Art of the Capitalist Era' or 'Art from the Age of Imperialism'. These exhibitions looked like contemporary innovative curatorial installations created to reveal the sociological presuppositions of avant-garde artistic practice. For example, works by Malevich and other artists were presented under a banner with the text: 'Anarchism is a reverse side of bourgeois order'. Here, a real attempt was undertaken to socially, economically and politically contextualize the new avant-garde art from the standpoint of art theoreticians who were sympathetic to this art but interpreted it as merely a necessary step on the way to the coming new Socialist art. These exhibitions could be seen as an application of communist organizational work to the productions of the Russian avant-garde, just as Lissitzky's exhibitions can be seen as an application of Suprematist space design to communist production. From today's perspective, it is difficult to say who moved faster forward – and who was left behind.

One should stress the fact that these sociologically oriented exhibitions of the Russian avant-garde were not denunciatory. They did not lead to the destruction of the avant-garde artworks or their removal from public view – which shows their essential difference from the (in)famous Nazi exhibition 'Degenerate Art'.[14] The contextualization of the Russian avant-garde in the late capitalist, (or imperialist, in Lenin's sense of globalized capitalist order) era corresponds to the interpretation of Marxism as an analytical, critical method. The curators were following the Marxist sociology of art as developed by Vladimir Friche. Friche contended that the development of capitalism made the notion of beauty and the practice of aesthetic contemplation of beauty obsolete. True art was to be found in the design of machines – where function defines form. The true artists of the capitalist era are the technicians that design these machines and make them work. Accordingly, the art of capitalist society reflects this process of mechanization that slowly but inevitably leads to the abolition of art as a separate activity.[15] This sociological interpretation of the avant-garde denies the movement's ability to change the context of its own emergence: the avant-garde becomes inscribed in the politico-economic context that produced avant-garde art in the first place. But this reinscription of it into the late capitalist order was understood by the curators of the exhibition not only as a critique of the avant-garde but also as its legitimation. The artistic avant-garde is proclaimed here to be a legitimate expression of its epoch, like Renaissance, Baroque and Romantic art. That is why these sociological exhibitions were not experienced as being anti-avant-gardist. The art of the avant-garde was institutionally disempowered in the middle of the 1930s, as Socialist Realism was officially established as the dominant artistic method. Here the work organized by the Communist Party finally achieved a victory over Suprematist unorganized work. But the Communist Party practiced the same sovereigntist reading of Marxism as the Russian avant-garde. Accordingly, Friche and his school were proclaimed to be an expression of vulgar (in other words, critical) Marxism and removed from positions of power, together with the artists of the Russian avant-garde.

Now, Lissitzky by no means saw himself in the context of developed or late capitalism but, rather, as a part of the vanguard of communist society. His artistic attitude, however, did not quite harmonize with the role of the artist in a communist society as envisaged by Marx and Engels. In the context of their discussion of Stirner's unorganized, that is, artistic work, they write:

> The exclusive concentration of artistic talent in particular individuals, and its suppression in the broad mass which is bound up with this, is a consequence of division of labour. Even if in certain social conditions, everyone were an excellent painter, that would by no means exclude the possibility of each of them being also an original painter, so that here too the difference between 'human' and 'unique' labour amounts to sheer nonsense. In any case, with a communist organization of society, there disappears the subordination of the artist to local and national narrowness, which arises entirely from division of labour, and also the subordination of the individual to some definite art, making him exclusively a painter, sculptor, etc.; the very name amply expresses the narrowness of his professional development and his dependence on division of labour. In a communist society there are no painters, but only people who engage in painting among other activities.[16]

Thus, Marx and Engels did not assume that in a socialist society the artist would take the role of social designer or political propagandist. Rather, they expected the arts would return to the search for beauty – but with emphasis on the production of beauty rather than on its consumption and contemplation. In a communist society, everybody can become an artist if he or she desires – but in a nonprofessional manner, in his or her free time. It was a vision of the future of art that was still shared by Clement Greenberg when at the end of his famous essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' he spoke about the possibility of saving beauty and art through the victory of 'international socialism' – Trotskyism, in fact. Obviously, Marx and Engels could not have foreseen the strategy of self-empowerment that leads many artists to undertake a leap from unorganized labour to organizational work. This self-empowerment was a goal of the artistic avant-gardes that emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century. But, after all, the organizational work by the Communist Party demonstrated itself as more efficient than Suprematist organizational work. The Party took over artistic labour – and organized it. In a certain way, the Soviet state brought to its logical end the process of the organization of professional artistic labour that, according to Marx and Engels, had already begun in bourgeois society. But at the same time, another prediction by Marx and Engels was also realized. During the Soviet era, unofficial, nonprofessional lay artistic activity emerged that was practiced by members of Soviet society among their other activities. This nonprofessional, lay art was unorganized but at the same time nonorganizational – even anti-organizational. In fact, it had no definite place inside Soviet society – no definite purpose, no identifiable social role. This unofficial – some say dissident – Soviet art was a lay art that was not made for the art market or for the museums, but for a small circle of friends. Under these conditions to choose the role of a lay artist meant to choose no place, to choose social absence – if you will, true utopia. But precisely because of its lack of any explicit social, political or economic context, and what I may call its zero social role and status, Russian unofficial art made the hidden, unconscious, everyday context of Soviet life visible. In a certain critical and analytical sense, unofficial Russian art was more Marxist than the art of the Russian avant-garde: It turned the artist himself into a 'zero' medium that manifested the 'objective' context of his practice.

In his works, Ilya Kabakov manifests precisely this zero-status of Russian unofficial art during the Soviet period and its social context. Kabakov starts again with Malevich's *Black Square*. In the early 1970s Kabakov produced a series of albums under the common title *10 Characters*. Each of these albums is a book of loose sheets depicting in images and words the counterfeit biography of an artist living on the margins of society whose work was neither recognized nor entirely preserved. The images in the albums are to be interpreted as the visions of their artist-heroes. All the images are accompanied by textual commentary from supposed various friends and relatives of each artist. Of course these lonely provincial artist-heroes can be seen to some degree as alter egos of Kabakov himself. Nonetheless, the distanced and ironic treatment of these fictitious creators in Kabakov's albums is by no means merely simulated. Actually, Kabakov is constantly practicing a kind of oscillation between identification and nonidentification with his heroes.

The artistic execution of the album's images recalls the conventional aesthetics that mark the typical illustrations found in Soviet children's books, following almost seamlessly in the tradition of nineteenth-century illustrated books. This was a style that Kabakov had mastered and practised fluently. These somewhat nostalgic, outdated aesthetics further emphasized that the images were the work of lay artists striving to find expression for their modest personal dreams in tranquil privacy, beyond the reach of official Soviet art and the West's modernist and postmodernist movements. Moreover, the invented spectators' comments that accompany the pictures offer evidence of the various misunderstandings to which any form of art is necessarily exposed – particularly in the eyes of its contemporaries. Yet at the same time, to the eyes of any well-informed viewer the works by these lay artists show numerous parallels with the glorious history of the twentieth-century avant-garde. The references range from early surrealism to abstract art, pop art and conceptual art. It is almost as though Kabakov's heroes have accidentally stumbled upon modernist art, though they are beyond the reach of its normative history. Their images are modern against their will; they are modern for their very ignorance of modernism. The final image in every album is a sheet of white paper announcing the death of the hero. And each album's text concludes with several general résumés of the artist's oeuvre, given by additional fictitious commentators, whose views, one assumes, are those of art critics entrusted with the final evaluation of the artist's legacy.

The first image in the first album of this series, 'In-the-Drawer-Sitting-Primakov'(1971), presents a black square that obviously refers to *Black Square* by Malevich. This image is interpreted as the blackness that a small boy sees when he sits in a drawer. On the pages that follow, the drawer opens and the boy begins to see what was concealed from him by the black square. Here the role of the square changes in a very radical way. The black square – the point zero of art – is understood not as an effect of the radical reduction of the whole visual world, as the black background of any vision that becomes visible at its zero point. Rather, it is interpreted as a cover-up, an impenetrable surface that hides a visible world behind it. This is not a utopian world created by the artist, but the world of everyday life – a real context that shows itself when the images that are produced by the artist's imagination are removed. Kabakov's hero has also gone through the point zero of art, but he has found on the other side not creative freedom but the 'real' context of everyday existence. In fact, this interpretation of the Black Square is historically accurate: Malevich painted his first, original black square over a figurative painting – and after some time the layer of the black paint cracked along the outlines of the figures it covered.

Kabakov's first major installation in the West, shown in 1988 at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York City, was also called *10 Characters*. The installation space was made to look like a typical Soviet communal apartment where former residents had left behind some nondescript rubbish that should really have been cleared away. Looking at this and many other Kabakov installations, some critics understood Kabakov's art as depicting the reality of Soviet communal apartments, where different families had to live together. However, the space created for these installations was always an abandoned space. The artists who lived and worked in the communal apartment had disappeared. One can see only traces of their living presence and the context in which they spent their lives.

Kabakov's communal apartment is a metaphor for the museum, and at the same time a critique of the museum. Every museum is a postmortal communal apartment in which the artists are brought together – and doomed to remain together throughout their afterlife. But the traditional museum creates an artificial context for their coexistence. Kabakov, on the other hand, tries to preserve the memory of the real-life context of their artistic practice. And it is precisely the zero point of art and the absence of the artist that makes this context visible and memorable.

The topic of abandoned space and absent artist is central to Kabakov's art. One can see this motif of disappearance already in the first installation that Kabakov made in Moscow: *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment* (1985). This installation shows an apartment that was left behind by a hero who flew into the cosmos directly from his bed – having accumulated the utopian energy necessary for such a flight by contemplating the Soviet posters that covered the walls of his apartment. He has left behind these posters, his empty bed and the destroyed ceiling. One of the rooms in the installation *10 Characters* is dedicated to an artist who disappeared into the white surface of the canvas that he was supposed to paint: the unpainted canvas and empty chair are left for us to see. Another room presents the garbage left by another character – obviously, also an artist – after his death. The garbage is sorted and classified, but there is no image of its former owner. Thus, in Kabakov's work the strategy of self-reduction that was practiced by modernist art and found its culmination in Russian Suprematism is brought to its logical end. Not only do the things and their images disappear, but the artist himself disappears without leaving any corpse behind. The body of work disappears together with the body of the artist himself. The only thing that remains of the artist is the scene of his disappearance.

And the individual subject of the unorganized artistic work is not the only thing that disappears. The subjects of organized, collective work also disappear, and abandon their working place. Kabakov's enormous installation *We're Living Here*, at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 1995, presented the deserted construction site of a gigantic palace, which lies in ruins. Evidently this palace was intended by its builders to be a work of 'high art' and their lives were dedicated to the creation of the sublime edifice. But not much of it is left, and what remains holds little fascination for the viewer. What Kabakov presents as the true works of art are the temporary, private and humble lodgings once occupied by the construction workers, dwellings strongly reminiscent of *arte povera* installations. We are also given the chance to behold the provisional clubs where the workmen spent their leisure hours and to appreciate them as modernist works of art. We understand that the builders of the palace are in fact artists – but artists against their will and beyond their intention.

Thus, Kabakov practices a reversal of the relationship between art and its context as established by the avant-garde. Avant-garde art could be seen as an attempt to reduce the existing context, all things and their representations to point zero, and once point zero is crossed, to begin creating new, artificial contexts. Kabakov repeats this strategy of reduction: his artist-heroes reduce everything, including themselves. However, after this act of self-reduction they do not become active creators of a new world, but instead disappear from the world, in which from the beginning they had no place. It is precisely this radicalized disappearance of art and artists that makes their context truly visible, and allows us to discover and analyze their dependence on the real economic, political, social and everyday conditions of their functioning. In fact, Kabakov invented the fictional figures of self-reducing, disappearing modernist artists for only one reason: to demonstrate the context of an individual's life and death. Not accidentally, Kabakov speaks of his installations as 'total installations': only the self-reduction to zero lets the context of abandoned life emerge in its totality. The radical disappearance of the artist into the point zero of art makes it possible to present the context of art as a total context. Self-nullification in and through art is an illusion. But only the pursuit of this illusion makes visible the conditions of art – conditions that include the possibility of this illusion.

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[1] 'Saint Max', in 'A Critique of the German Ideology', Marx/Engels Internet Archive, marxists.org.

[2] Kazimir Malevich, '*Sobranie sochinenii*', vol. 1, Moscow: Gilea 1995, p. 29.

[3] Ibid., 34.

[4] Max Stirner, *The Ego and His Own*, New York: Benjamin R. Tucker 1907, p. 3.

[5] Ibid., p. 309.

[6] Malevich, pp. 161–226.

[7] Kazimir Malevich, *Die gegenstandslose Welt*, Bauhausbuch 1927. Reprinted and distributed by Hans M. Wingler, Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag 1980.

[8] Michael Fried 'Art and Objecthood', *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 1998.

[9] Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, Chicago: Chicago University Press 1996.

[10] Ibid.

[11] El Lissitzky, 'Suprematizm mirostroitel'stva', ('The Suprematism of World-Building' 1920]), pp. 56–7.

[12] Nikolai Tarabukin, 'From the Easel to the Machine', *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison, New York: Harper and Row 1982, pp. 135–42.

[13] El Lissitzky: Maler, Architekt, Typograf, Fotograf. Erinnerungen, Briefe, Schriften. Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers (Hrsg.), Dresden 1992, pp. 366ff.

[14] Contrary to the way it was described in Adam Jolles' 'Stalin's Talking Museums', *Oxford Art Journal*, no. 28, pp. 425–55.

[15] Vladimir Friche, 'Sotsiologiya iskusstva', Leningrad: Gos. izdatel'stvo, 1926, pp. 204ff.

[16] *A Critique of the German Ideology*.

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CHAPTER 6

Clement Greenberg: An Engineer of Art

The essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' (1939) that opens *Art and Culture* arguably remains the most famous essay ever written by Clement Greenberg. At the same time, it is his strangest essay. It was obviously written to legitimize the avant-garde, to defend avant-garde art against its critics. However, it is difficult to imagine a text that would be less avant-gardist in its main presuppositions and its rhetorical makeup. The texts from the epoch of the early avant-garde argue for the new and vital against the old and dead, for the future against the past. These texts preach a radical break with European art traditions, and in some cases even the physical destruction of the art of the past. From Marinetti to Malevich, the avant-garde's artists and theoreticians express their unreserved admiration for the new technological era. They are impatient to completely abandon the artistic tradition and create point zero, the situation of a radically new beginning. Their only fear is that they might lack the will to break with the tradition radically enough, to be new enough – to overlook something that might still connect their work to the art of the past and, thus, should be rejected and destroyed. All of the artworks and texts of the historical avant-garde are dictated by this competition in radicalism, by this will to find some traces of the past that others overlooked, and to completely erase them.

However, Greenberg starts his essay with the assertion that the avant-garde is a specific mode of continuing the great European artistic tradition – even a specific mode of Alexandrianism. And he praises the avant-garde precisely for being such a continuation. The avant-garde is for Greenberg not an attempt to create a new civilization and a new mankind but 'an imitation of imitation' of the masterpieces inherited by modernity from the great European past. If classical art was an imitation of nature, the art of the avant-garde is an imitation of this imitation. According to Greenberg, good avant-garde art tries to reveal the techniques that old masters used to produce their works. In this respect, an avant-garde artist can be compared to a well-trained art connoisseur who is interested not so much in the subject of an individual artwork (because, as Greenberg states, this subject is dictated to the artist mostly from the outside, by the culture in which the artist lives), but in the artistic means that the artist uses to treat this subject. Now, for Greenberg the avant-garde artist is, indeed, such a professional connoisseur, revealing the art techniques that his or her predecessors used but ignoring their subjects. Thus, the avant-garde operates mainly by means of abstraction: it removes the 'what' of the artwork to reveal its 'how'. This shift in interpretation of avant-garde art practice – understood no longer as a radical, revolutionary new beginning, but rather as a thematization of the techniques of the traditional art – corresponds to a shift in the understanding of avant-garde art politics. Greenberg believes that the connoisseurship that makes the spectator attentive to the purely formal, technical, material aspects of the artwork is accessible only to representatives of the ruling class, to those who 'could command the leisure and comfort that always go hand and hand with cultivation of some sort'. And that means for Greenberg that avant-garde art can hope to get its financial and social support only from the same 'rich and cultivated' who historically supported traditional art. Thus avant-garde art remains attached to the bourgeois ruling class 'by the umbilical cord of gold'.

To say to an avant-garde artist like Marinetti or Malevich that he continues the art tradition instead of breaking with it means, actually, to insult him – and Greenberg knew this, of course. So why does he so obstinately insist on the avant-garde being a continuation of and not a break with traditional art? The reason, it seems to me, is more political than aesthetic: Greenberg is not interested here in avant-garde art per se, or even in avant-garde artists as art producers – rather, he is interested in the figure of the art consumer. The actual question that informs Greenberg's essay is this one: Who is supposed to be the consumer of avant-garde art? Or to put it in different terms: What constitutes the material, economic basis of avant-garde art, understood as a part of the societal superstructure? In fact, Greenberg is more worried about how to secure the socioeconomic basis of avant-garde art than he is interested in its utopian dreams. This attitude reminds the reader of a question that tormented the Marxist revolutionary intelligentsia throughout the twentieth century: Who is supposed to be the material and social bearer, or consumer, of the revolutionary idea? It is well known that the initial hope that the proletariat could be a driving material force in bringing the socialist revolution to realization began to dwindle soon enough. Now, Greenberg does not expect that from the start the half-educated masses could be consumers and material bearers of artistic revolutions. Rather, he finds it reasonable to expect that the ruling class, the bourgeoisie, will support the new art. However, the historical reality of the 1930s brings Greenberg to the conclusion that the bourgeoisie is no longer able to fulfil the role of a social basis, an economic and political supporter of high-quality art. Time and again he states that the secured domination of high-quality art can only be guaranteed by the secured domination of the ruling class. The moment a ruling class begins to feel itself insecure, weakened, and endangered by the rising power of the masses, the first thing this ruling class is ready to sacrifice to these masses is art. To keep its real political and economic power, the ruling class tries to erase distinctions of taste and to create an illusion of aesthetic solidarity with the masses – a solidarity that conceals the society's real power structures and economic inequalities. Greenberg cites as examples primarily the cultural politics of the Stalinist Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and Fascist Italy. But he also indirectly suggests that American bourgeoisie follows the same strategy of aesthetic self-betrayal and false solidarity with mass cultural kitsch to prevent the masses from visual identifying their class enemy. Ultimately, Greenberg sees no great difference between democratic and totalitarian regimes in their relationship to the avant-garde. Both regimes accept the cultural taste of the masses to create an illusion of cultural unity between ruling elites and wider populations. The modern elites will not develop their own, distinctive 'high' taste because they do not want to expose their cultural difference from the masses and unnecessarily irritate them. This aesthetic self-betrayal on the part of modern ruling classes leads to a lack of support for any 'serious art'. In this respect Greenberg obviously follows the conservative critics of modernity like Oswald Spengler and T. S. Eliot – their themes and figures resonate, indeed, throughout his writings. According to these and similar authors, modernity leads to a cultural homogenization of European societies. The ruling classes begin to think practically, pragmatically and technically. They become unwilling to lose their time and energy in contemplation, self-cultivation and aesthetic experience. It is this cultural decline of old ruling elites that worries Greenberg above all, and at the end of his essay he expresses a more than vague hope for the coming victory of international socialism, a victory that would not so much create a new culture as secure 'the preservation of whatever living culture we have right now'. In an uncanny but very instructive way these final words of Greenberg's essay remind the reader of the main principle of Stalinist cultural politics, reiterated innumerable times in all the Soviet publications of the same historical period: The role of the proletariat is not so much to create a new culture as to appropriate and secure the best of what world culture has already created, because the bourgeoisie betrayed this heritage by its submission to Fascist rule and by its support of the decadent, destructive, elitist avant-garde. And, in fact, Greenberg's technical understanding of art was not very different from the famous Stalinist definition of writers and artists as 'engineers of the human soul'.

Greenberg's 'elitist' attitude provoked a lot of criticism from the Western left – especially in the postwar period. The critics noted that Greenberg ignored the emancipatory, revolutionary dimension of the avant-garde. And of course, they had a point. However, it should not be overlooked that by allying the avant-garde with the high art of the past, Greenberg found a new enemy for the avant-garde: kitsch. Greenberg radically displaced the avant-garde by dehistoricizing the opposition between avant-garde and non-avant-garde. Instead of an opposition between the art of the past and art of the future, he proposed an opposition between high and low art within the context of modern, contemporary, present culture. According to the traditional, historicist scheme, the avant-garde as an artistic manifestation of modernity in the same sense in which Renaissance, Baroque, Classicism or Romanticism were artistic manifestations of previous historical epochs. And there is no doubt that the artists of the historical European avant-garde shared this view. Greenberg himself, at the beginning of his essay, speaks of historical reflection as a precondition for the emergence of the avant-garde. At the same time, he notes that this succession of historical art formations ignores folk art, describing only the art history of the ruling class. Now, Greenberg believed that in our modern times the artistic taste of the masses could no longer be ignored. Accordingly, kitsch, understood by Greenberg as an artistic manifestation of this mass taste, could not be ignored either. The conflict between different historical formations is replaced here by a class conflict within a single historical formation: capitalist modernity. The true achievement of 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' is not Greenberg's theory of the avant-garde but his discovery of kitsch as a specific artistic formation. In the best Marxist tradition, Greenberg turns his attention to the art of the oppressed classes and puts this art at the centre of his cultural analysis – even if his own aesthetic attitude toward this art remains extremely negative. It is not accidental that 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' served as a starting point for the analysis of the culture industry undertaken by Adorno and Horkheimer in their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Even today our understanding of mass culture remains deeply indebted to 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' because it is still informed by an opposition between mass culture and 'high' avant-garde art.

Of course, Greenberg was not the first author to have reacted to the growth of modern mass culture. But before Greenberg, this mass culture was mostly understood as being simply a collection of leftovers from the art of previous cultural epochs that would disappear under the influence of avant-garde art, once avant-garde art had created a new artistic style that would embrace the whole of society. European avant-gardes believed that the disappearance of these remnants of the past was unavoidable, because the laws of artistic progress are intimately connected to those of technological and social progress. Greenberg, on the contrary, argues in his essay that kitsch is not simply the residue of the previous epochs but a thoroughly modern phenomenon – in fact, as modern as the avant-garde itself. For Greenberg, kitsch reflects a sensibility in the modern masses, who precisely because of that prefer kitsch to the art of the past. Kitsch should be recognized as a product of new technology and social order, to an even greater extent than the avant-garde, because the avant-garde is still analyzing the masterpieces of the past, instead of simply using them, as kitsch does. In fact, Greenberg is very pessimistic about the historical prospects of the avant-garde, which he sees being increasingly economically and politically abandoned along with the high art of the past. But Greenberg is at the same time extremely optimistic about the prospects of kitsch, which he sees as an increasingly successful – if also extremely unpleasant and even hateful – competitor of the avant-garde. However, kitsch and the avant-garde are too unlike in their goals and strategies to enter into any genuine competition. Kitsch replaces traditional art while the avant-garde simply analyzes it. By identifying kitsch as a distinct art phenomenon, Greenberg effectively opens the way for the new avant-garde to analyse kitsch as the historical avant-garde analyzed the art of the past. One can argue that without this Greenbergian discovery of kitsch as a specific aesthetic and artistic domain, pop art, conceptual art, and different forms of institutional critique would be impossible, even though representatives of these practices liked to criticize Greenberg and despite the fact that the practices were not endorsed by Greenberg himself. In fact, Greenberg redefined kitsch as the only true aesthetic manifestation of our modernity – the true heir of traditional art. And he redefined the avant-garde by reducing it to the role of analytical and critical interpreter of the glorious art of the past. The next step could only be to transfer this analytical approach from traditional art to its legitimate heir – namely, kitsch. Not accidentally, this critical attitude toward mass-culture or kitsch has been frequently accused – also with the argumentative support found in Greenberg's texts – as being elitist and reflecting the arrogant, antidemocratic attitudes of the ruling bourgeoisie.

However, even if one is ready to agree with Greenberg that the avant-garde is not a truly innovative, creative and prophetic break with the art of the past, but merely a technical analysis of it, it is still hard to believe that this technical-analytical attitude reflects the aesthetic taste of the ruling classes. Obviously, the ruling elites are not interested in art production, but only in art consumption – even if their taste is more refined than the popular taste. In fact, Greenberg's definition of avant-garde art puts it beyond any possible aesthetic evaluation, popular or elite. According to Greenberg, the ideal spectator of avant-garde art is less interested in it as a source of aesthetic delectation than as a source of knowledge, of information about art production and its devices, media and techniques. Art ceases here to be a matter of taste and becomes a matter of truth. In this sense one can say that avant-garde art is, indeed, autonomous – just as modern science is autonomous, independent of any individual taste or political attitude. The famous Greenbergian 'autonomous art' ceases to be a synonym for 'elite taste' and 'ivory tower'. Instead, it becomes simply a manifestation of technical mastery and knowledge that is accessible and instructive for everybody who is interested in analyzing and possibly acquiring such mastery and knowledge. Thus, Greenberg sounds more realistic when he says that avant-garde artists are the artist's artists. But this perfectly true insight seems to disappoint him, because it does not promise avant-garde art any solid social basis. It is like saying that a revolution is only interesting to the revolutionaries – which could be also true but is somehow depressing. For Greenberg, artists are bohemians – living without a secure position in the society in which they are working. That is why he asks himself who can have a taste for the truth and assumes that this kind of taste belongs to a minority – especially in the case of artistic truth understood as artistic technique. This answer seems to be a correct one if one has traditional or avant-garde art in mind. However, this assumption ignores the fact that the popular spread of art, even if that art is kitsch, indicates a growing involvement of the masses not only in art consumption but also in art production. Already Russian formalists, whose theory of the avant-garde that was understood by them as an analysis of the purely formal, material 'madeness' of the artwork was used by Greenberg referred to the fact that artworks are the technically produced objects in the world and that they, therefore, should be analysed in the same terms as objects like cars, trains or planes. From this point of view there is no clear difference anymore between art and design, between artworks and mere technical products. This constructivist, productivist point of view opened up the possibility of seeing art not in the context of leisured and informed contemplation but in terms of production, that is, in terms that refer more to the activities of scientists and workers than to the lifestyle of the leisure class. In fact, Greenberg follows the same line of reasoning when he praises the avant-garde for demonstrating the techniques of art instead of just displaying its effects.

In a later essay, 'The Plight of Culture' (1953), Greenberg even more radically insists on the productivist view of culture, citing Marx as his most important witness. Greenberg states that modern industrialism devalued leisure: Even the rich must work, and though they enjoy their leisure, they are prouder of their achievements. That is why Greenberg agrees and disagrees at the same time with the diagnosis of modern culture that T. S. Eliot gave in his book *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture*. Greenberg agrees with Eliot that traditional culture based on leisure and refinement entered a period of decline because modern industrialization pushes everybody to work. But at the same time, Greenberg writes, 'The only solution for culture that I conceive of under these conditions is to shift its centre of gravity away from leisure and place it squarely in the middle of work.' Indeed, the abandonment of the traditional ideal of cultivation through leisure seems to be the only possible way out of the innumerable paradoxes that were produced by Greenberg's attempt to connect this ideal with the concept of the avant-garde – the attempt that he had undertaken in 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch'. But even if Greenberg found this way out, he was to careful not to follow it. He writes further about the proposed solution: 'I am suggesting something whose outcome I cannot imagine.' And even further:

> Beyond this speculation, which is admittedly schematic and abstract, I cannot go … But at least it helps if we do not have to despair of the ultimate consequences for culture of industrialism. And it also helps if we do not have to stop thinking at the point where Spengler and Toynbee and Eliot do.

The difficulty of imagining culture as situated ‘in the middle of work’ has its roots in the Romantic opposition between the artwork and the industrial product – an opposition that still informs Greenberg’s writing, even if he praises the avant-garde for shifting the attention of the spectator from the content of art to its technique, to its madeness. That is why he makes the somewhat counterintuitive assumption that only the ruling class, being excluded from the production process, has enough leisure time to contemplate and aesthetically appreciate the technical side of art. In fact, one would expect this kind of appreciation rather from the people that are immediately involved in the production of art. And, of course, the number of such people continued to increase during the unfolding of the modern age, and it has grown exponentially in recent times. At the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, art entered a new era –an era of mass artistic production that followed the era of mass art consumption. This developmental period has been variously described by influential theoreticians as the era of kitsch (Greenberg), the era of ‘culture industry’ (Adorno), and a society of spectacle (Debord). This was the era of art that was made for the masses – of art that wanted to seduce the masses, to be consumed by the masses. Today, the situation has changed, primarily through two developments. One of them is the emergence of new technical means of image production and distribution, and the other is a shift in our understanding of art, a change in the rules that are used for the identification of what is art and what is not art.

Let us begin with the second development. Today, we do not identify an artwork primarily as an object produced through manual work by an individual artist. Rather, an artwork is seen as an effect of the choosing, placing, shifting, transforming and combining of already existing images and objects. And that is, of course, precisely what hundreds of millions of people around the world are doing every day in the context of their everyday life. Of course, even after discoursing on the death of the author and deconstruction of subjectivity and intentionality, we tend to think that all these operations can be interpreted as art-generating only if they are originally dictated by an artistic project, by an aesthetic intention – and we also tend to assume that the masses do not have such an intention and that they only produce aesthetic effects ‘unconsciously’.

But today’s masses have been well informed about advanced art production through biennials, documents, and related media coverage – and, yes, they produce their art intentionally. Contemporary means of communication and social networks like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter make it possible for the global population to display their photos, videos and texts in such a way that they cannot be distinguished from any other post-Conceptualist artwork. And contemporary design makes it possible for the same population to shape and experience their own bodies, apartments or workplaces as artistic objects and installations. This means that contemporary art has become definitively a mass cultural practice, and, further, that today’s artist lives and operates primarily among art producers rather than among art consumers. For a very long time, this everyday level of shared artistic practice was overlooked – even if many art theorists, like the Russian formalists, or artists, like Duchamp, tried repeatedly to attract our attention to modern everyday life as an actual field of modern art practices. In our time, everyday life has become even more artificial, theatricalized and designed. Today, the artist shares artistic practice with the public as artists of former times shared with it religion or politics. To be an artist has ceased to be an exclusive fate – instead, it has become representative of the society as a whole on its most intimate, everyday level.

Thus, one can say that the contemporary person operates partially as art producer and partially as art consumer, being involved in the work process and having a certain amount of leisure time as well. That means that this person reacts to art in an ambiguous way. On the one hand, as a producer and, therefore, an art producer, he or she is attentive to the technical side of art with the goal of learning from it, imitating it, modifying it or rejecting it. In this sense, the contemporary human being looks at art necessarily from the avant-garde perspective, that is, from the perspective if its technicality, its madeness. But, on the other hand, he or she is able in leisure hours to simply enjoy the effects of art without paying much attention to its technique; in other words, to perceive this art as kitsch. Thus, one can argue that the distinction between avant-garde and kitsch as introduced by Greenberg does not describe two different areas, or types, or practices of art but, rather, two different attitudes toward art. Every artwork – and every object, for that matter – can be seen and appreciated from both the avant-garde and kitsch perspectives. In the first case, one is interested in techniques, in the second one is interested in effects. Or, to put it in a different way: in the first case one looks at art as an art producer and in the second as an art consumer. And these two different attitudes cannot be rooted in the class structure of modern society, because in modern society everybody has to work and everybody has some leisure. Thus, our perception of art is permanently shifting between the avant-garde attitude and the kitsch attitude. The opposition that Greenberg described as macrocultural defines, in fact, the aesthetic sensibility of every individual member of contemporary society.

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CHAPTER 7

On Realism

In the context of art, the word *realism* has at least two meanings, related to two different traditions. The first is the tradition of mimetic, realistic, naturalistic painting and sculpture. Here *realism* means the mimetic representation of things of the world as they present themselves to our 'natural', uninformed and technologically unarmed gaze. Many traditional images, icons, for example, seem nonrealistic because they aim to present the 'other', normally invisible world. The modern artworks that aim to confront us with the 'essential core' of the world or with a 'subjective vision' of it are also not recognized by us as realistic. We would also not speak of realism when looking at the pictures produced with the help of microscope or telescope. Realist art is defined precisely by its readiness to reject all religious and philosophical visions and speculations, as well as technologically produced images, and instead to reproduce the average, ordinary, profane view of the world. However, this reproduction has a certain 'unrealistic' aspect: it takes a certain state of things out of the flow of time.

In this sense, mimetic, representational realism makes things visible that would remain invisible if they were not artistically represented. Indeed, all ordinary things are hard to see, because they exist inside the material flow – they are finite, mortal, constantly changing their form, and so only briefly on view. Also, we tend to overlook things and their specific *thingness* when we use them for our own practical purposes. To really see things, we have to stop using them and begin to contemplate them. In other words, the role of art in the materialist age is to make things visible. Thus, according to Heidegger, our original mode of existence in the world is the practical one. Things manifest themselves to us primarily as tools. We use things. This use is their truth – but also the truth of our own existence in the world. Science does not look at things from the perspective of their ordinary, everyday use or the mode of this use. Rather, it is art that shows us our own use of things – and in doing so tells us truths about our way of existing in the world. The example that Heidegger uses is well known: a pair of shoes in a painting by van Gogh. The shoes look used, even worn out – and they open to us the world in which they are used and the way in which they are used.[1] Not only may a painting of shoes show us their 'thingness', but also an artistic representation of any other technological tool. Art can also show the thingness of the things of nature that usually function for us as raw materials for our technology.[2] Here Heidegger reflects on the tendency of modern art to show things as worn out, damaged, disfigured, destroyed (as in Cubism), and/or defunctionalized (as in Duchamp's ready-made practice).

However, artworks that create visibility for other things lose their own visibility as things in the world. Looking at representational, mimetic artwork we necessarily overlook its own thingness. And we also overlook the institutional framing of the artwork that secures its visibility. In a somewhat paradoxical way, an artwork becomes less visible than even the most ordinary things – things that are themselves relatively invisible. Yet institutionalized artworks do not share the fate of ordinary things, because these artworks are better protected. In this respect they can instead be compared to luxury goods made of gold or precious stones. The artwork may seem to be different, because luxury objects are valued for what they are (gold, precious stones) and artworks are valued for what they are not (that is, they represent things that are different from themselves), but in terms of protection and privilege they are effectually the same. And this similarity undermines the representational function of art. If an artwork begins to circulate and be considered primarily as a valuable luxury object, its representational value begins to decrease: The artwork is now valued for what it is and not for what it represents. Thus, representational artworks are either less or more visible than other things, but in any case different from them. That is also why Heidegger rejects the goal of full and continuous visibility – the goal that legitimizes traditional art institutions. Art makes things and their use visible – but only for a moment, through a disclosure that is followed by closure. Visibility is possible, but only for a moment. For Heidegger, the art business is a symptom of this closure. An artwork continues to circulate as a valuable and protected object, but the opening of the world that this artwork offered to the spectator becomes closed.[3]

We have the same experience under the system of representational democracy. One is ready to identify oneself with the elected persons only at the moment of election. And the next day one already feels betrayed by them. Representational realism is also treacherous. It is treacherous because the realist artwork reflects the fate of things, but does not share it. To share the fate of all things – or the vast majority of things – means to share the perspective of their decay, dissolution and disappearance. And it also means to have a low degree of visibility. Some ideas can be clear and distinctive, as Descartes described them. But things cannot. To make their thingness become visible – even for a moment – means to betray these things.

Thus, for an artwork to be able to reveal the truth of things it must not represent them, but rather share their fate. Here we can speak about direct realism – in analogy to direct democracy and direct action. It is in this sense that artists and theoreticians of the Russian avant-garde spoke of the realism of their art. In the same sense, Alexandre Kojève spoke about the concrete, objective character of Kandinsky's paintings: They were created as autonomous things in the world, analogous to other things.[4] And such was precisely the goal of the radical avant-garde: to tell the truth about the material world by making the artwork share the fate of all the other things of this world. That is why the radical avant-garde wanted to destroy museums and other traditional art institutions that protected artworks from their immersion and possible dissolution in the material flow. The artwork had to be put at risk and confronted with the same forces of destruction that endangered ordinary things. The avant-garde is traditionally accused of being elitist, which is very ironic. The radical avant-garde wanted to be universal, to share the common fate of things. It wanted to be directly realistic and directly democratic – if one likes, superdemocratic. And probably that is also what brought it into conflict with the popular mood, which prefers stability and prosperity combined with a certain degree of privilege and protection. Only in truly revolutionary times did the universalist, directly realistic avant-garde impulse coincide with the popular mood. But these times were historically rare.

The avant-garde artists were ready to throw their artworks into the material flow because they hoped that these artworks could secure their own visibility, stability and longevity. That was the hope of the Russian Constructivists, artists of De Stijl and Bauhaus. They believed that geometry would always exist and assert itself. After all, square, triangle and circle – being completely artificial – had successfully survived many centuries in the context of mathematics and science before they were used in the context of art. But the same can be said of such things as chaos and absurdity. The opera *Victory of the Sun* (1913), which celebrates the victory of creative chaos over ordinary life and served as the starting point for the Russian avant-garde, begins with these lines written by Alexei Kruchenykh: ‘All is well that begins well. And ends? There will be no end.’[5] The artists of Dada also believed in the future of their art as they thematized the chaotic and the absurd. And Kandinsky believed that he had discovered laws of form that are and will always be relevant for everything visible. From today’s perspective, it is difficult to say whether the hopes of the avant-garde were vindicated or not. On the one hand, the works of the avant-garde ultimately landed in the museums. But, on the other hand, more and more people live inside geometrically organized urban spaces, and besides, one does not have a feeling that the domination of chaos and absurdity has decreased since the times of Dadaism.

However, to make one’s own artworks really share the common fate of all things, one should endow them with low visibility. These artworks should be neither spectacularly successful, nor spectacular failures. The struggle against spectacle and the spectacular marks especially the art of the 1960s – the activities of Guy Debord are the most famous example of this struggle. As a rule, happenings and performances that were characteristic of the art of the 1960s were organized for a close circle of participants. This art could be documented (photographed, recorded or videotaped), but not kept materially intact for a long period of time. During these years, low visibility in art was a kind of exception, but meanwhile it became ubiquitous. The low visibility of contemporary art is an effect not only of its character as event producer (rather than object producer) but also of the fact that on the Internet, any particular documentation of the produced events drowns in the flow of information. Thus, contemporary art truly shares its low visibility and transitory character with all other things of the world.

The only difference is this: Artists take responsibility for individual things and their visibility. 'Taking responsibility' for things does not necessarily refer to the act of their creation. It simply means that the artists are ready to answer the question 'Why are certain things as they are?'. As a rule, this question of responsibility is regarded as structurally unanswerable in our postreligious world. We tend to speak about the flow of things, information and economic events as if this flow were neutral, as if nobody in particular were responsible for it. Heidegger has also spoken of the clearing offered by being itself. However, art provokes us to look for individual responsibility as an answer to the question of why things are as they are. It is actually what makes art political – that artists take individual or collective responsibility for what they are offering us. And by so doing they provoke us to take the question about personal responsibility ever further. After all, the whole world is a field of possible artistic action, and that means that art potentially takes responsibility for the entire world – whether through action or inaction.

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1 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, vol.1, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2003 [1835], p. 25

2 Edmund Husserl, *Cartesianische Meditationen*, Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag 1987, pp. 99ff.

3 Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art, Basic' *Writings*, London: Harper Perennial 2008, pp. 158–9.

4 Martin Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', *Basic Writings*, pp. 339ff.

[5] Heidegger, ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, p. 145.

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CHAPTER 8

Global Conceptualism Revisited

From today's perspective, the biggest change that the conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s brought about is this: After conceptualism, we can no longer see art primarily as the production and exhibition of individual things – even ready-made things. However, this does not mean that conceptual or postconceptual art became somehow 'immaterial'. Conceptual artists shifted their attention from individual objects to their relationships in space and time. These relationships could be purely spatial and temporal, but they could also be logical and political. They could be relationships among things, texts and photo-documents but also involve performances, happenings, films and videos – all shown inside the same installation space. In other words, conceptual art can be basically characterized as installation art – as a shift from the exhibition space presenting individual, disconnected objects to one based on a holistic understanding of space, in which the relations between these objects are exhibited in the first place.

One could say that objects and events are organized by an installation space in the same way individual nouns and verbs are organized by a sentence. We all know the substantial role that the famous 'linguistic turn' played in the emergence and development of conceptual art. The influence of Wittgenstein and French Structuralism on conceptual art practice was decisive, to mention only a few relevant names among many others. This influence of philosophy and later of so-called theory on conceptual art cannot be reduced to the use of textual material within an art context, nor to the legitimation of particular artworks by theoretical discourses. The installation space itself was conceived and organized by conceptualist artists to convey a certain meaning by an arrangement of images, texts and things, analogous to the way words are organized into sentences to convey a meaning in spoken and written language. Following a period dominated by a formalist understanding of art, conceptual art brought back an artistic practice that wanted to be meaningful and communicative. Art began to make theoretical statements, to convey empirical experiences, to formulate ethical and political attitudes and to tell stories. Thus, rather than art beginning to use language, it began to be used *as* language, with a communicative and even educative purpose.

But this new orientation towards meaning and communication does not mean that art became somehow immaterial, that its materiality lost its relevance, or that its medium dissolved into message. The contrary is the case. Every art is material – and can only be material. The possibility of using concepts, projects, ideas and political messages in art was opened by the philosophers of 'linguistic turn' precisely because they asserted the linguistic character of thinking and the material character of language. These philosophers understood thinking as the practice of operating and manipulating language. And language was understood by them as being material through and through: a combination of sounds and visual signs. Now the real, epoch-making achievement of conceptual art becomes clear: It demonstrated the equivalence, or at least a parallelism, between word and image, between the order of words and the order of things, the grammar of language and the grammar of visual space.

Of course, art had always been communicative. It communicated images of the external world, the attitudes and emotions of artists, the specific cultural dispositions of its time, its own materiality and nature as a medium. However, traditionally the communicative function of art had been subjugated to its aesthetic function. Art had always been judged primarily according to the criteria of beauty, sensual pleasure and aesthetic satisfaction, or of calculated displeasure and aesthetic shock. Conceptual art established its practices beyond the traditional dichotomy of aesthetics and anti-aesthetics – beyond sensual pleasure and sensual shock. Of course, this does not mean that conceptual art ignored the notion of form and concentrated exclusively upon content and meaning. But the reflection of form does not necessarily mean the subjugation or even the obliteration of content. In the context of conceptual art, a concern with form presents itself not so much in terms of traditional aesthetics, but rather in terms of poetics, or even rhetoric. We can speak about the elegant, beautiful formulation of an idea – but by doing so we mean precisely that this formulation helps this idea to find an adequate and persuasive linguistic or visual presentation. On the contrary, a formulation that is so brilliant that it obliterates the idea by its brilliance we experience not as beautiful but as clumsy. That is why conceptual art prefers clear, sober, minimalist forms; such forms better serve the communication of ideas. Conceptual art is interested in the problem of form, but from the perspective of poetics and rhetoric, not from the traditional perspective of aesthetics.

It makes sense at this point to reflect for a moment upon this shift that conceptual art has effected from aesthetics to poetics. The aesthetic attitude is basically the spectator's attitude. Aesthetics as a philosophical tradition and a university discipline that relates to art and reflects upon art from the perspective of the art spectator, or, one could also say, from the perspective of the art consumer. The spectator expects a so-called aesthetic experience from art. From Kant, we know that aesthetic experience can be an experience of beauty or of the sublime. It can be an experience of sensual pleasure. But it can also be an 'antiaesthetic' experience of displeasure, or of frustration provoked by an artwork that lacks all the qualities which an 'affirmative' aesthetics expects it to possess. It can be an experience of a utopian vision capable of leading mankind out of its present condition to a new society in which beauty reigns, or, to formulate it in a somewhat different way, it could be a redistribution of the sensible that refigures the spectator's field of vision by showing certain things and giving access to certain voices that were earlier concealed or obscured. But it can also be a demonstration of the impossibility of positive aesthetic experience within a society based on oppression and exploitation, in which the total commercialization and commodification of art undermines any possible utopian perspective from the beginning. As we know, both of these seemingly contradictory aesthetic experiences can be equally aesthetically enjoyable. However, to be able to experience an aesthetic enjoyment of any kind, the spectator has to be aesthetically educated. This education necessarily reflects the social and cultural milieus into which the spectator was born and in which he or she lives. In other words, an aesthetic attitude presupposes the subordination of art production to art consumption – and likewise, the subordination of artistic theory and practice to a sociological perspective.

Indeed, from the aesthetic point of view, the artist is a supplier of aesthetic experiences, including experiences that are produced with the goal of frustrating or modifying the viewer's aesthetic sensibility. The subject of the aesthetic attitude is the master; the artist is the servant. Of course, the servant can and does manipulate the master, as Hegel convincingly demonstrated in his *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, but nevertheless remains the servant. This situation did not basically change when the artist became a servant of the public at large, instead of serving under a regime of patronage by the church or traditional autocratic powers. In previous periods, the artist was obliged to present 'content' – subjects, motifs, narratives and so forth – that was dictated by religious faith or the interests of political power. Today, the artist is required to treat topics of public interest. Just as the church or the autocratic powers of yesteryear wanted their beliefs and interests to be represented by the artist, so today's democratic public wants to find in art representations of the issues, topics, political controversies and social aspirations by which it is moved in everyday life. The politicization of art is often seen as an antidote to the purely aesthetic attitude that allegedly requires art to be merely beautiful. But in fact, the politicization of art can be easily combined with its aestheticization – as far as both are seen from the perspective of the spectator, or of the consumer. Clement Greenberg remarked long ago that an artist is free and able to demonstrate his or her mastery and taste at their best when the content of the artwork is prescribed by an external authority. Being liberated from the question 'What should I do?' the artist can concentrate on the purely formal side of art – on the question 'How should I do it?' This means 'How should I do it in such a way that certain contents become attractive and appealing (or unattractive and repellent) to the aesthetic sensibility of the public?' If the politicization of art is interpreted as making certain political attitudes attractive (or unattractive) to the public – as is usually the case – then the politicization of art becomes completely subjected to the aesthetic attitude. In the end, the goal becomes the packaging of certain political contents in an aesthetically attractive form. But of course through an act of real political engagement, aesthetic form loses its relevance, and is discarded in the name of direct political practice. Here art functions as a political advertisement that becomes superfluous when it has achieved its goal.

In fact, this is only one of many examples that demonstrate why an aesthetic attitude becomes problematic when applied to the arts. In fact, the aesthetic attitude does not need art, and functions much better without it. It is old wisdom that all the wonders of art pale in comparison with the wonders of nature. In terms of aesthetic experience, no work of art can bear comparison with an even averagely beautiful sunset. And of course, the sublime aspects of nature and politics can only be fully experienced by witnessing a natural catastrophe, revolution or war, not by reading a novel or looking at a picture. This, in fact, was the opinion shared by Kant and the Romantic poets and artists who launched the first influential aesthetic discourse. The real world, they claimed, is the legitimate object of an aesthetic attitude, as well as of scientific and ethical attitudes – not art. According to Kant, an artwork can become a legitimate object of aesthetic contemplation only as a work of genius, that is, only as a manifestation of natural force operating unconsciously in and through an individual artist. Professional art can serve only as a means of education in taste and aesthetic judgment. After this education is completed, art, like Wittgenstein’s ladder, can be thrown away, and the subject confronted with the aesthetic experience of life itself. Seen from an aesthetic perspective, art reveals itself as something that can and should be overcome. All things can be seen from an aesthetic perspective; all things can serve as sources of aesthetic experience and become objects of aesthetic judgment. From the perspective of aesthetics, art has no privileged position. Rather, art is something that posits itself between the possessor of the aesthetic attitude and the world. However, a mature adult does not need any aesthetic tutelage from art, being able to rely on personal sensibility and taste. Aesthetic discourse, if used to legitimize art, *de facto* undermines it.

How, then, should one explain how the discourse of aesthetics acquired such a dominant position during the modern period? The main reason is, of course, a statistical one. While aesthetic reflection on art began and was developed through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, artists were a minority, and spectators were the majority. The question of why one might make art seemed irrelevant: Artists were supposed to make art to earn their living. This seemed to be an adequate explanation for the existence of the arts. The problem was why other people should look at art. The answer was: to form their taste, to develop their aesthetic sensibility; art was a school for sight and other senses. The division between artists and spectators seemed to be clear-cut and firmly established socially: Spectators were subjects of an aesthetic attitude, and works produced by artists were objects of aesthetic contemplation. But from the beginning of the twentieth century, this simple dichotomy began to collapse.

Today, our contemporary means of communication, including networks like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, allow global populations to position their photos, videos and texts in the culture in such a way that they cannot be distinguished from any other postconceptualist artworks. The visual grammar of a Web site is not too different from the grammar of an installation space. Through the Internet, conceptual art today has become a mass cultural practice. Walter Benjamin famously remarked that the masses easily accepted montage in film, even if they had difficulties accepting collage in Cubist paintings. The new medium of film made artistic devices acceptable that remained problematic in the old medium of painting. The same can be said for conceptual art: even people having difficulties accepting conceptual and post-conceptual installation art have no difficulties in using the Internet for their own installations.

But is it legitimate to characterize self-presentation on the Internet, involving hundreds of millions of people all around the world, as an artistic practice?

Conceptual art can be also characterized as art that permanently asks the question ‘What is art?’ The collaboration Art and Language, Marcel Broodthaers, Joseph Beuys and many other artists whom we tend to situate today inside the frame of an ‘expanded’ conceptualism, asked and answered this question in very different ways. We can ask it, first, from an aesthetic perspective: What are we ready to identify as art, and under which conditions; what kinds of objects do we recognize as artworks, and what kinds of spaces as art spaces? But we could also abandon this contemplative, passive, aesthetic attitude and ask a different question: What does is mean to become actively involved in art? Or in other words, what does it mean to become an artist?

Speaking in Hegelian terms, the traditional aesthetic attitude remains situated on the level of consciousness – on the level of our ability to see and appreciate the world aesthetically. But this attitude does not reach the level of self-consciousness. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel points out that self-consciousness does not emerge as an effect of passive self-observation. We become aware of our own existence, our own subjectivity, when we are endangered by another subjectivity, through struggle, in conflict, in a situation of existential risk-taking that could lead to death. Now, analogously, we can speak of an ‘aesthetic self-consciousness’ that emerges, not when we look aesthetically at a world populated by others, but when we begin to reflect upon our own exposure to the gaze of others. Artistic, poetic, rhetorical practice is none other than self-presentation to the gaze of the other, which presupposes danger, conflict and risk of failure.

The feeling of almost permanent exposure to the gaze of the other is a very modern feeling, famously described by Michel Foucault as the effect of being put under a panoptical type of observation by an external power. Throughout the twentieth century, a constantly growing number of human beings have become objects of surveillance to a degree that was unthinkable at any earlier period of human history. This practice of omnipresent, panoptical surveillance is increasing in our time at an even greater pace – and the Internet has become the main medium of this surveillance. At the same time, the emergence and rapid development of global networks of visual media are creating a new global agora for self-presentation and for political discussion and action.

The political discussions in the ancient Greek agora presupposed the immediate living presence and visibility of the participants. Today everybody has to establish his or her own image, a visible persona, in the context of global visual media. We're not just talking about the game Second Life: We all have to create a virtual 'avatar', an artificial double, in order to begin to communicate and to act. The 'First Life' of contemporary media functions in the same way. Everybody who wants to go public, to begin to act in today's international political agora, has to create an individualized public persona. This requirement does not apply only to political and cultural elites. Today, more people are involved in active image production than are engaged only in passive image contemplation.

This 'autopoetic' practice, of course, can easily be interpreted as a kind of commercial image-making, brand development or trend-setting. There is no doubt that any public persona is also a commodity, and every gesture toward going public serves the interests of numerous profiteers and potential shareholders. Following this line of argument, it is easy to perceive any autopoetic gesture as a gesture of self-commodification, and, accordingly, to begin a critique of autopoetic practice as a cover operation designed to conceal the social ambitions and economic interests of its protagonist. However, as I have tried to show, the emergence of an aesthetic self-consciousness and autopoetic self-presentation was originally a reaction – a necessarily polemical and political reaction – against the image that others, society and power have made of us. Every public persona is created primarily within a political battle and for this battle – for attack and protection, as a sword and a shield. Obviously, professional artists were from the beginning professionals of self-exposure. But today the general population is also becoming more and more aesthetically self-conscious and more and more involved in this autopoetic practice.

Our contemporary character is often described/defined by the vague notion of ‘aestheticization of life’. The usual application of this notion is problematic in many ways. It suggests a purely passive, contemplative, aesthetic attitude toward our ‘society of the spectacle’. But who is the subject of this attitude? Who is the spectator of the society of spectacle? It is not an artist, because the artist practices polemical self-presentation. It is not the masses, because they are also involved – consciously or unconsciously – in autopoetic practices and have no time for pure contemplation. Such a subject could only be God. However, the notion of aesthetic self-consciousness and poetic, artistic practice must be secularized, purified of any theological overtones. Every act of aestheticization has its author. We always can and should ask the question, ‘Who aestheticizes– and to what purpose?’ The aesthetic field is not a space of peaceful contemplation, but a battlefield where different gazes clash and fight. The notion of the ‘aestheticization of life’ suggests the subjugation of life under a certain form. But as I have already tried to show, conceptual art taught us to see form as a poetic instrument of communication rather than an object of contemplation.

What is constituted and communicated in and through an artwork? It is not any objective, impersonal knowledge such as that constituted and communicated by science. In art it is subjectivity that comes to self-awareness through self-exposure and that communicates itself. That is why the figure of the artist manifests the inner contradictions of modern subjectivation in a paradigmatic way. Indeed, the transition from the divine gaze to surveillance by secular powers has produced a set of contradictory desires and aspirations in the hearts of subjects today. Modern societies are haunted by visions of total control and exposure – anti-utopian visions of an Orwellian type. Accordingly, modern subjects try to protect their bodies from total exposure and defend their privacy against the danger of this totalitarian surveillance. Subjects operating in a sociopolitical space struggle ceaselessly for their right to privacy – the right to keep their bodies hidden. On the other hand, even the most panoptical exposure to secular power is less complete than exposure to the divine gaze. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of God is followed by a long lamentation about the loss of this spectator of our souls. If, on the one hand, modern exposure of the self seems excessive, on the other hand it seems insufficient. Of course, our culture has made great efforts to compensate for the loss of the divine spectator. But this compensation remains only partial. Every system of surveillance is too selective; it overlooks most of the things that it is supposed to see. Beyond that, the images that accumulate in such a system are mostly not really seen, analyzed or interpreted. The bureaucratic forms that register our identities are too primitive to produce interesting subjectivities. Accordingly, we remain only partially subjectified.

It this condition of partial subjectivation that engenders within us two contradictory aspirations: we are interested in retaining privacy, in reducing surveillance, in obscuring our bodies and desires, but at the time we aspire to radicalized exposure, exposure beyond the limits of social control. I would argue that it is this radicalized subjectivation through radical self-exposure that is practiced by contemporary art. In this way exposure and subjectivation cease to be means of social control. Instead, self-exposure presupposes at least a certain degree of sovereignty over one's own process of subjectivation. The art of modernity shows us different techniques of self-exposure, exceeding the usual practices of surveillance. More self-discipline than is socially necessary (Malevich, Mondrian, American minimalism); more confessions of the hidden, ugly or obscure than are sought by the public. But contemporary art confronts us with even more numerous and nuanced strategies of self-subjectivation involving the self-situating of the artist in the contemporary political field. These strategies include not only different forms of political engagement but also all possible manifestations of the private hesitation, uncertainty and even despair that usually remain hidden beneath the public personae of standard political protagonists. Belief in the social role of the artist is combined here with a deep scepticism concerning the effectiveness of that role. This erasure of the line dividing public commitment from private insecurities has become an important element of contemporary art practice. Here again, the private becomes public – without any external pressure and/or enhanced surveillance.

Among other things, this means that art should not be theorized in sociological terms. Reference to the naturally gifted, hidden, 'invisible' subjectivity of the artist should not be replaced by reference to his or her socially constructed identity – even if artistic practice is understood as the 'deconstruction' of this identity. The subjectivity and identity of the artist do not precede artistic practice: They are the results, the products of this practice. Of course, self-subjectivation is a not a fully autonomous process. Rather, it depends on many factors, one of them being the expectations of the public. The public also knows that the social exposure of human bodies can be only partial, and is therefore unreliable and untrustworthy. That is why the public expects the artist to produce a radicalized visibility and self-exposure. Thus, the artistic strategy of self-exposure never begins at zero point. The artist has to take into consideration from the outset his or her already existing exposure to the public. However, the same human body can be submitted to very different processes of socially determined subjectivation, depending on the particular cultural context in which this body may become visualized. Every contemporary cultural migrant – and the international art scene is full of migrating artists, curators, art writers – has innumerable opportunities to experience how his or her body is situated and subjectified in and though different cultural, ethnic and political contexts.

But if so many people all around the world are involved in autopoetic activities, why do we still speak about art as a specific practice? As I have noted, the emergence of the Internet as the dominating medium of self-presentation might lead us to the conclusion that we no longer need 'real' art spaces to produce art. And over the past two decades, institutional and private art spaces have been subjected to a massive critique. This critique is, of course, completely legitimate. But one should not forget that the Internet is also a space controlled primarily by corporate interests – not a space of individual freedom, though often celebrated as one in its early days. The standard Internet user, as a rule, focuses on the computer screen and overlooks the hardware of the Internet – all those monitors, terminals and cables that inscribe the Internet into contemporary industrial civilization. That is why the Internet has produced in some theoretical heads those dreamlike notions of immaterial work, a post-Fordist condition, and so forth. All of these notions are software notions. The reality of the Internet is in its hardware.

A traditional installation space offers a particularly appropriate arena for showing the hardware that is regularly overlooked during standard Internet use. As a computer user, one is immersed in solitary communication with the medium; one falls into a state of self-oblivion, of unawareness of one's own body. The purpose served by an installation that offers visitors an opportunity to use computers and the Internet in public now becomes apparent. One no longer concentrates upon a solitary screen but wanders from one screen to the next, from one computer installation to another. The itinerary performed by the viewer within the exhibition space undermines the traditional isolation of the Internet user. At the same time, an exhibition using the Web and other digital media renders visible the material, physical aspect of these media – their hardware, the stuff from which they are made. All of the machinery that enters the visitor's field of vision thus destroys the illusion that everything of any importance in the digital realm only takes place onscreen. Even more importantly, other visitors will stray into the viewer's visual field. In this way the visitor becomes aware that he or she is also being observed by the others.

Thus one can say that neither the Internet nor institutional art spaces can be seen as privileged spaces of autopoetic self-presentation. But at the same time, an artist can use these spaces – among many others – to pursue this goal. Indeed, contemporary artists increasingly want to operate not so much inside specific art milieus and spaces but rather on the global political and social stage, proclaiming and pursuing certain political and social goals. At the same time, they remain artists. What does this problematic title, *artist*, mean, within the extended, globalized, sociopolitical context? One can perceive it as a stigma that makes any political claims suspect and any political activity inefficient, because inescapably co-opted by the art system. However, failures, uncertainties and frustrations are not the sole privilege of artists. Professional politicians and activists experience them to the same, if not to a greater, degree. The only difference is that professional politicians and activists conceal their frustrations and uncertainties behind their public persona. And accordingly, the failed political action remains final and unredeemed within political reality itself. But a failed political action can be a good work of art, because failure reveals the subjectivities operating behind action even better than does success. By assuming the title *artist*, the subject of this action signals from the beginning that he or she aims at self-exposure, rather than at the self-concealment that is usual and even necessary in professional politics. Such self-exposure is bad politics but good art; herein lies the ultimate difference between artistic and nonartistic types of practice.

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CHAPTER 9

Modernity and Contemporaneity: Mechanical vs. Digital Reproduction

Our contemporary age seems to be different from all the other historically known ages in at least one respect: Never before has humanity been so interested in its own contemporaneity. The Middle Ages were interested in eternity, the Renaissance was interested in the past, modernity was interested in the future. Our epoch is interested primarily in itself. The rapid proliferation of museums of contemporary art all over the world is only one – but a very obvious – symptom of this keen interest in here and now. At the same time, it is also a symptom of a widespread feeling that we do not know our own contemporaneity. And, indeed, the processes of globalization, and the development of the information networks that inform us of events taking place everywhere in the world in real time, lead to the synchronization of different local histories. Our contemporaneity is an effect of this synchronization – an effect that time and again produces in us a feeling of surprise. It is not the future that surprises us. We are mostly surprised by our own time, which seems to us somehow uncanny and weird. It is the same feeling of surprise that we experience when we go into a museum of contemporary art and are confronted with extremely heterogeneous messages, forms and attitudes that have only one thing in common – that they happen here and now, that they are contemporary with us. This experience of the shared present as unknown and uncanny is what differentiates our time from the period of modernity, in which the present was experienced as a moment of transition from the familiar past to the unfamiliar future. There are various ways to describe and interpret the difference between the modern and contemporary ages, but I would like to analyze this difference as a contrast between two modes of reproduction: mechanical and digital. According to Walter Benjamin, *the original* is simply another name for the presence of the present – for something that happens here and now.[1] Thus, analyzing our different modes of reproducing the original means analyzing our different modes of experiencing presence, contemporaneity, of being co-present with the flow of time, with the original event of time and in time, and the techniques that we use to produce this co-presence.

Mechanical Reproduction

In his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Benjamin famously assumes the possibility of perfect reproduction, reproduction that makes it no longer possible to visually distinguish between an original and its copy. Again and again in his text, Benjamin insists on this perfection. He speaks of mechanical reproduction as the 'most perfect reproduction',[2] which may not alter the visual qualities of the original work of art. Surely, it is open to doubt whether the techniques of reproduction that existed at the time, or even today, ever really achieved or can achieve such a degree of perfection. For Benjamin, however, the ideal possibility of perfect reproducibility was more important that the technical possibilities that actually existed in his day. The question that he raises is 'Does the extinction of the visual distinction between original and copy mean the extinction of this distinction itself?'

As we know, Benjamin answers this question in the negative. The disappearance of any visual distinction between the original and the copy – or, at least, its potential disappearance – does not eliminate another, invisible but no less real distinction between them: The original has an aura that the copy has not.[3] Aura is, for Benjamin, the relationship of the artwork to its external context. The original has a particular site – and through this particular site, the original is inscribed in history as this particular, unique object. The copy, by contrast, is virtual, siteless, ahistorical; from the beginning, it appears as potential multiplicity. To reproduce something is to remove it from its site, to deterritorialize it. Reproduction transposes the artwork into the network of topologically undetermined circulation. Benjamin's formulations are well known:

> Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its here and now, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be … The 'here' and 'now' of the original constitute the concept of its authenticity, and lay the basis for the notion of a tradition that has up to the present day passed this object along as something having a self and an identity.

The copy lacks authenticity, therefore, not because it visually differs from the original but because it has no location and consequently is not inscribed in history. Accordingly, for Benjamin photography and, especially, film are the most modern art forms, as from their very inception they are mechanically produced and destined for topologically undetermined circulation. According to this view, the age of mechanical reproduction cannot produce anything original; it can only erase the originality of the originals that it has inherited from the previous times.

Now, from today's historic distance this claim of the essential nonoriginality of modernity seems a bit strange, because the notion of originality seems to be at the very centre of modern culture and modernist art – especially of avant-garde art. Indeed, every serious artist of the avant-garde insisted on the originality of his or her art. Artistic lack of originality – understood as imitation of the past, including the most recent past – was utterly despised in the modernist and avant-garde cultural milieus. However, the artistic avant-garde used the notion of originality in a completely different way than Benjamin used it.

Benjamin's concept of originality is obviously rooted in the concept of nature. Not accidentally, Benjamin uses the experience of being in the middle of a splendid Italian landscape as a model of an auratic experience that cannot be reproduced without loosing its 'here and now'.[4] To be original means here to be inimitable, irreproducible, in fact, natural – because nature is supposed to be inimitable and irreproducible by technical means. Thus, even if Benjamin is ready to accept that nature can be technically reproduced and perfectly simulated on the level of its materiality and its visual form, he still insists on the impossibility of reproducing its aura, its inscription in here and now – its event, if you will. The relationship between original and copy is understood here as a relationship between nature and technique. And the aura of originality functions as a moment of resistance against the mass invasion of nature by the technical means of reproduction.

This appeal to nature as a source of resistance against modern commercial mass culture is characteristic of other important authors of the same period – for example, of Clement Greenberg in his ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’[5] and later of Theodor Adorno and his analysis of ‘cultural industry’.[6] Greenberg defines the avant-garde ultimately as mimetic: if classical art was an imitation of nature, then the art avant-garde is imitation of this imitation. Thus, according to Greenberg, the avant-garde keeps the inner connection with nature – even if in a broken and indirect way – and saves this connection from the onslaught of technically produced cultural kitsch. Adorno also believes that one can find the origin of authentic art in *beschädigte Natur* (‘damaged nature’) and in nostalgia for a harmonious, true, original unity between man and nature – even if he asserts at the same time that such a unity can be only illusory and the nostalgia for it is necessarily misleading. Still, Adorno speaks of mimesis of nature – even if it is merely the mimesis of its *Beschädigung*, of its damaged status. All of these formulations are also not so different from the formulations which Martin Heidegger uses in his ‘Origin of the Work of Art’[7] by defining art as *techne* that let *physis* (hidden nature) manifest, present itself, but present itself in its original self-concealment, or, to use the Adornian vocabulary, in its originally damaged form. Now that means that, according to these authors, modernity could relate to originality, that is to nature, only in a negative form by demonstrating the loss of originality, of aura, of natural harmony, or of nature’s original unconcealment.

However, for the artistic avant-garde, to be original did not mean to be related to nature. Accordingly, it also did not mean to be inimitable and irreproducible in the future, but only to be historically new. The notion of the original functioned here as an expanded notion of copyright. In fact, the production of the new presupposes from the beginning its further reproduction. That is why the history of the avant-garde is among other things a history of interminable quarrels about who was the first, who created something original, and who was merely an imitator. The radical avant-garde – from Marinetti to Malevich or Mondrian – did not want to reestablish a new, if only negative, relationship to nature (understood as the loss of aura by Benjamin, or *beschädigte*, or damaged, nature by Adorno, or concealment of being by Heidegger). Rather, it wanted to completely break with nature in the name of the new industrial world, and with the mimesis of nature in the name of inventing new, unnatural forms of art and life. That is why the main artistic device of the avant-garde was the operation of reduction. Reduction opens a perspective on the most effective reproduction – it is always easier to reproduce something simplified than something complicated.

Inside the paradigm of modernity, which is defined by mechanical reproduction, the presence of the present can be experienced only at one moment – namely, at the revolutionary moment, the auratic moment of reduction that opens the way for the post-revolutionary reproduction of the results of this reduction. That is why modernity is a time of permanent longing for the revolution – for the revolutionary moment of pure presence between the historical past and repetitive future. It is also not accidental that this longing has found its ultimate expression in the theory of permanent revolution –in the vision of mechanical reproduction of the revolutionary moment itself.

Digital Reproduction

At first glance, digitalization seems to guarantee a precise, literal reproduction of a text or an image and its circulation in the information networks more effectively than any other known technique, being merely a technically improved version of mechanical reproduction. However, it is not so much the digital image or text itself as the image or text file, the digital data, that remains identical through the process of its reproduction and distribution. But the image file is not an image – the image file is invisible. The digital image is an effect of the visualization of the invisible image file, of the invisible digital data. Accordingly, a digital image cannot be merely exhibited or copied (as an analogue, ‘mechanically reproducible’ image can), but always only staged or performed. Here, the image begins to function like a piece of music, whose score is not identical to the piece – the score being not audible, but silent. To be heard, music has to be performed. One can argue that digitalization turns visual arts into performing arts.

But this performative character of digital reproduction means that the visual identity between the original and the copy – or, rather, the visual identity among different digital copies – cannot be guaranteed. Just as a music performance is always different from a previous performance of the same score, a digitalized image or text appears always in a new form, according to the formats and software that a particular user applies when he or she causes the digital data to appear on a screen. The visualization of digital data is always an act of interpretation by the Internet user. I speak here not in terms of interpretation of the content, that is, the meaning, of this data, but rather of the interpretation of its form. And such an interpretation cannot be submitted to any criticism, because it cannot be visually compared to the original – the original being invisible. In the case of mechanical reproduction, the original is visible and can be compared to a copy – so the copy can be corrected and any possible distortion of the original form reduced. But if the original is invisible, no such comparison is possible: Every act of visualization of digital data remains uncertain in its relationship to the original; one could even say that every such performance itself becomes an original. Under the conditions of the digital age, Internet users are responsible for the appearance or disappearance of digitalized images and texts on their computer screens. The digitalized images do not exist unless we as users give them a certain ‘here and now’. That means that every digital copy has its own ‘here and now’ – an aura of originality – that a mechanical copy does not have. Thus, the relationship between original and copy was changed by digitalization in a radical way – and this change can be described as a moment of break between modernity and contemporaneity.

We give digital data its presence by our manual work on a computer keyboard. This act involves nature, because it involves our natural body; the mechanical copy, on the contrary, is not produced manually. By clicking on the names of different files and links one calls up data that is per se invisible and gives to this data a certain form and a certain place on one's screen. One can speak here in the Heideggerian sense about *techne* that the user applies to let things appear that otherwise would remain hidden (*physis*). In this sense, one could speak about a return to nature through digitalization, because the operation of reproduction is manually performed. And one manually produced copy is necessarily visually different from all other manually produced copies – a difference that mechanical reproduction was meant to erase. However, I would argue that the digital age does not only effectuate a return to nature, but also a return to the supernatural. We make digital files appear by clicking on their names – as in earlier times we conjured spirits by calling their names.

Now, in this way we not only make the spirits – good or bad spirits, God or demons – to become visible to us, but we also make ourselves to become visible to them. And that is precisely what happens today when we use the Internet and call up the invisible data: we, too, become visible, traceable for the spirits that we call. The digital age is in the first place – before all other things – an age of digital surveillance in real time. Every presentation of digital data, every production of a digital copy-image, is at the same time a creation of our own image, an act of self-visualisation. Making a digital copy, I make a copy of myself, and offer this copy to an invisible spectator hidden behind the surface of my personal computer's screen. And this is the fundamental difference between mechanical and digital reproduction. Mechanical reproduction also presupposed a certain control over its personal use. But this control was a statistical one: One could trace the number of sold copies of an item and, accordingly, the behaviour of certain target groups. In this case, the observer was the market. But as an observer, the market is too unspecific – among other things, precisely because of difficulty of distinguishing between the original and the copy and among the different copies of the same original.

Today, we are back in the realm not only of nature or *physis* but also of metaphysics. Actually, we are almost back to the medieval condition of total divine control. Instead of nature and theology, we have the Internet and conspiracy theory. As Nietzsche wrote in his famous 'God is dead' passage, we have lost the spectator of our souls, and because of that, the soul itself. After Nietzsche and during the whole epoch of mechanical reproduction, we heard a lot about this demise of subjectivity. We heard from Heidegger that *die Sprache spricht* ('the language speaks'), rather than the individual who is using the language. We have heard from Marshall McLuhan that the message of the medium undermines, subverts and shifts every individual message transmitted through this medium. Later, Derridian deconstruction and Deleuzian machines of desire rid us of our last illusions concerning the possibility of stabilizing an individual message. Mastery over communication is revealed by modern media theory as a subjective illusion. This incapacity of the subject to formulate, stabilize and communicate a message through the media is often characterized as the death of the subject. However, now we have once more a universal spectator, because our 'virtual' or 'digital souls' are individually traceable. These 'virtual souls' are digital reproductions of our off-line behaviour – reproductions that we can only partially control. Our experience of contemporaneity is defined not so much by the presence of things to us as spectators, but rather by the presence of our virtual souls to the gaze of the hidden spectator.

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1 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations*, London: Fontana 1992.

2 Ibid., pp. 214–215.

3 Ibid., p. 214.

4 Ibid., p. 217.

5 Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', *Art and Culture*, New York 1961.

6 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2002.

7 Martin Heidegger, ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, *Off the Beaten Track*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002.

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CHAPTER 10

Google: Words beyond Grammar

Human life can be described as a prolonged dialogue with the world. Man interrogates the world and is interrogated by the world. This dialogue is regulated by the way in which we define the legitimate questions we may address to the world or the world may address to us, and the way in which we can identify the relevant answers to these questions. If we believe that the world was created by God, we ask questions and wait for answers that are different from those that we would ask if we believed that the world is uncreated ‘empirical reality’. And if we believe that the human being is a rational animal, we practice this dialogue in a different way than we would if we believed that it is a body of desire. Thus our dialogue with the world is always based on certain philosophical presuppositions that define its medium and its rhetorical form.

Today we practice our dialogue with the world primarily via the Internet. If we want to ask questions to the world, we act as Internet users. And if we want to answer the questions that the world asks us, we act as content providers. In both cases, our dialogical behaviour is defined by the specific rules and ways in which the questions can be asked and answered within the framework of the Internet. As the Internet currently functions, these rules and ways are predominantly defined by Google. Thus, Google plays today the role that traditionally was filled by philosophy and religion. Google is the first known philosophical machine, and regulates our dialogue with the world by replacing ‘vague’ metaphysical and ideological presuppositions with strictly formalized and universally applicable rules of access. That is why it is central for contemporary philosophical research to analyze Google’s mode of operation, and in particular to analyze the philosophical presuppositions that determine its structure and functioning. As I will try to show, Google, as a philosophical machine, has its own genealogy in the history of philosophy – especially recent philosophy.

Let us consider Google's rules for dialogue with the world. According to these rules, every question has to be formulated as a word or combination of words. The answer is given as a set of contexts in which this word or combination of words may be discovered by the search machine. This means that Google defines the legitimate question as a question about the meaning of an individual word or word set. And it identifies the legitimate answer to this question as a display of all the accessible contexts in which this word occurs. The sum of all displayed contexts is understood here as the true meaning of the word or word set queried by the user. And because there is no other question that can be formulated for Google besides the question concerning the meaning of the individual word, this true meaning appears as the only possible truth that is accessible to the contemporary subject. Accordingly, true knowledge as such is understood as a sum of all the occurrences of all the words of all the languages through which humankind currently operates.

Thus, Google presupposes and codifies the radical dissolution of language into sets of individual words. It operates through words that are liberated from their subjection to the usual rules of language – to its grammar. Traditionally, when we chose language (and not, for example, religious ecstasy or sexual desire) as a medium of dialogue with the world, we assumed that our questions, to be legitimate, had to take the form of grammatically correct sentences, such as 'What is the meaning of life?' or 'Was the world created by a higher intelligence?' Obviously, these questions could and should be answered only by a grammatically correct discourse – by philosophical teaching, a scientific theory, or a literary narrative.

Google dissolves all discourses by turning them into the word clouds that function as collections of words beyond grammar. These word clouds do not 'say' anything; they only contain or do not contain this or that particular word. Accordingly, Google presupposes the liberation of individual words from their grammatical chains, from their subjection to language understood as a grammatically defined word hierarchy. As a philosophical machine, Google is based upon a belief in extragrammatical freedom and the equality of all words and their right to migrate freely in any possible direction – from one local, particular word cloud to another. The trajectory of this migration is the truth of an individual word as it is displayed by Google. And the sum of all these trajectories is the truth of language as a whole, the truth of language that has lost its grammatical power over words. Grammar is the means by which language traditionally created hierarchy among its words. And this hierarchy informed and even determined the way in which traditional philosophical questioning of knowledge and truth functioned. Questioning via Google presupposes, on the contrary, an extragrammatical set of word clouds as an answer – the word clouds in which the sought-for word occurs.

In fact, the understanding of truth as the true meaning of individual words is not exactly philosophical news. Plato had already begun to question the meaning of individual words like ‘justice’ or ‘good’. Thus, Plato began the process of liberating words from their subjection to the grammar of mythical narratives and sophistic discourses. But he believed that this meaning could only be found in a unique word cloud that had its place in the transcendent sky of pure ideas. Later, encyclopaedias and dictionaries tried to define the privileged, normative meanings of individual words. These encyclopaedias and dictionaries were the next step in the history of the liberation of words from language. But the freedom of words was still restricted here by their use in normatively prescribed contexts. Twentieth-century philosophy furthered this process of liberation. Structuralism – beginning with Saussure and Jakobson – shifted its attention from the normative use of words to their factual use in the framework of living, contemporary languages. It was a huge step towards the liberation of words, but the concept of the normative context of usage remained basically intact. The present, living, contemporary language became the typical normative context. The same can be said about the Anglo-American tradition of investigating ‘ordinary language’, which is also based upon an ideology of presence. The real change began with poststructuralism – especially with Derridian deconstruction. Here, individual words began to migrate from one context to another, permanently changing their meanings along the way. Accordingly, any attempt to establish a normative context was declared futile. But this migration was understood by deconstructionists as a potentially infinite migration with an infinite trajectory, so that every question that concerned the meaning of words was declared to be unanswerable.

Google, therefore, can be seen as an answer to deconstruction in at least two ways. On the one hand, Google is based on the same understanding of language as topological space, in which individual words follow their own trajectories – undermining any attempts to territorialize them in fixed, privileged, normative contexts and to ascribe to them normative meanings. On the other hand, Google is nonetheless based on the belief that these trajectories are finite, and so can be calculated and displayed. Of course we can imagine an infinite number of contexts and therefore infinite trajectories for every individual word. Yet this kind of imagination ignores the fact that every context has to have a certain material bearer – a medium – to be 'real'. Otherwise, such a context is merely fictional, and therefore irrelevant to our search for knowledge and truth. One can say that Google turns deconstruction from its head onto its feet by replacing a potentially infinite, but only imaginary, proliferation of contexts with a finite search engine. This search engine looks not for the infinite possibilities of meaning for a word but for a factually available set of contexts through which its meanings are defined. In fact, the infinite play of imagination has its own limitations within a situation in which all words occur in all contexts. In such a situation, all words become identical in their meaning – they all collapse into one floating signifier with no meaning. Google prevents such an outcome by limiting its search to really existing and already displayed contexts. The trajectories of different words remain finite and therefore different. One can say that every word becomes characterized by the collection of its meanings – a collection of the contexts that this word has accumulated during its migration through language and that can be characterized as this word's symbolic capital. And these collections, being 'real', that is, material, are also different.

In the context of a Google search, the Internet user finds him- or herself in a metalinguistic position. Indeed, the user as user is not presented on the Internet as a word context. Of course, one can google one's own name and get all the contexts in which this name appears. But the results of this search manifest the user not as a user but as a content provider. At the same time, we know that Google tracks the search habits of individual users and creates contexts from their search practices. But these contexts – used primarily for the targeting of advertisements – usually remain hidden from the user.

Heidegger spoke about language as a house of being – a house in which man dwells. This metaphor presupposes the understanding of language as a grammatical construction: The grammar of the language can indeed be compared to the architectural grammar of a house. However, the liberation of individual words from their syntactical arrangements turns the house of language into a word cloud. Man becomes linguistically homeless. Through the liberation of words, the language user is sent upon a trajectory that is necessarily an extralinguistic one. Instead of being a shepherd of words, as Heidegger suggested, man becomes a word curator, using old linguistic contexts, places or territories, or creating new ones. Thus, we cease to speak in the traditional sense of the word. Instead, we let words appear or disappear in different contexts, in a completely silent, purely operational, extra- or metalinguistic mode of practice.

This fundamental shift in the use of language is well reflected by the growing equivalence between affirmative and critical contexts. The dissolution of grammar and the liberation of individual words make the difference between yes and no, between affirmative and critical positions increasingly irrelevant. What is important is only whether a certain word (or name, theory or event) emerges in one or many contexts. In terms of a Google search, occurrence in an affirmative or a negative context brings a word the same amount of symbolic capital. Thus, the basic linguistic operations of affirmation and negation become irrelevant and are replaced by the extralinguistic operation of inclusion or exclusion of certain words in certain contexts – which is precisely the definition of curatorship. The word *curator* describes one who operates with texts as with word clouds – the curator is interested not in what these texts 'say' but rather in what words occur in these texts and what words do not.

In fact, this development was predicted by advanced artistic movements at the beginning of the twentieth century – especially by Fillipo Tommaso Marinetti in 1912, in his essay on the destruction of syntax, in which he explicitly called for the liberation of words from syntactical chains.[1] Around the same time, in 1914, he proposed an early version of word clouds that he named *parole in libertà* ('words set free').[2] At the same time, he began consciously to practice art and politics that had the goal of shocking and disturbing bourgeois cultural European milieus. In this way, Marinetti invented what one could call negative self-propaganda. He understood that in an era of liberated words, to be an object of public disgust or even hatred causes one's name to occur more often in the media than being an object of public sympathy would. We all know how this strategy has become a standard strategy of self-publicity in the Google era.

Another early step in the emancipation of the word from grammar can be seen in the Freudian use of language. Individual words work here almost as Internet links: they liberate themselves from their grammatical positions and begin to function as connections to other, subconscious contexts. This Freudian invention was used extensively by Surrealist art and literature. The conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s created installation spaces for word contexts and word clouds. Avant-garde art has also experimented with the liberation of sound fragments and individual letters from their subjugation to grammatically established word forms. One is reminded of these artistic practices when one follows a Google search 'in real time': The search machine begins its work before the grammatically correct form of the sought-for word emerges.

Thus one can say that Google, with its metalinguistic, operational and manipulative approach to language, establishes itself even more in the tradition of twentieth-century avant-garde art than in the tradition of advanced philosophy. But at the same time, it is precisely this artistic tradition that challenges Google's practices. The struggle for the liberation of words is also a struggle for their equality. The radical equality of words – when liberated from the hierarchical structures dictated by grammar – projects language as a kind of perfect word democracy that corresponds to political democracy. Indeed, the liberation of words and their equality among themselves make them also universally accessible. One can say that avant-garde poetry and the art of the twentieth century have created a vision of a utopian Google – of the free movement of liberated words in social space. The factual, really existing Google is obviously not only a techno-political realization but also a betrayal of this utopian dream of word liberation.

Indeed, one can ask whether Google actually displays every really existing context when we use it to reveal the truth of language, that is, the complete sum of trajectories of all individual words. Obviously the answer to this question can only be negative. First of all, many of these contexts remain secret; to be able to visit them one needs special access. Additionally, individual contexts are prioritized by Google – and the user generally restricts his or her attention to the first several pages that get displayed. But the most important problem relates to the metalinguistic position of the Google search engine itself. The user of the Internet search operates, as already noted, in a metalinguistic position. He or she does not speak, but instead practices the selection and evaluation of words and contexts. However, Google itself also escapes linguistic representation. It practices a preselection and prioritization that are also acts of word curatorship. The person doing the Internet search knows that his or her selection and evaluation of contexts depend on the processes of the preselection and preevaluation effected by the Google search engine. The user can see only what Google shows. Thus, Google is inevitably experienced by its users as a hidden (and potentially dangerous) subjectivity, operating in a mode of world conspiracy. Such conspiratorial thinking would be impossible if Google were infinite, but it is finite and therefore suspected of manipulation. Indeed, the following questions become unavoidable: ‘Why these and not other displayed contexts?’ ‘Why this and not other prioritizations of search results?’ ‘What are the hidden contexts that Google creates by observing the search practices of individual users?’

These questions lead towards a phenomenon that increasingly defines the intellectual atmosphere of recent decades. I speak here about the political and technological turn in the history of metaphysics. There was – and still is – a lot of talk about the end of metaphysics. But I would argue that in fact the contrary is true: We are experiencing not the end of metaphysics but the democratization and proliferation of metaphysics. Indeed, every Internet user is not ‘in the world’, because he or she is not in language. And Google presents itself as a metaphysical machine that is also manipulated by a metalinguistic, metaphysical subjectivity. Thus the subject doing a Google search gets involved in a struggle for the truth that is on the one hand metaphysical and on the other hand political and technological. It is metaphysical because it is a struggle not for this or that particular ‘worldly’ truth – or, to say it in other terms, for a particular context. Rather, it is a struggle for access to the truth as such, understood as the sum total of all materially existing contexts. It is the struggle for a utopian ideal of the free flow of information – the free migration of liberated words through the totality of social space.

However, this struggle becomes techno-political, because if all words are already recognized as ‘metaphysically’ free and equal, every particular instance of their inclusion or exclusion must be identified as an act of political, technological or economic power. Without a utopian vision of the fully liberated word, Google would be impossible – and a critique of Google would also be impossible. Only if language is already transformed into a word cloud may the question concerning the symbolic capital of every individual word be asked, because only in this case does the symbolic capital of individual words become a result of the extralinguistic practices of inclusion and exclusion. ‘Really existing’ Google can only be criticized from the poetic perspective of what can be called a utopian Google – a Google that embodies the concept of all words’ equality and freedom. The utopian, avant-garde ideal of the liberated word has produced a ‘difficult poetry’ that for many readers seems inaccessible. However, it is precisely this utopian ideal that defines our contemporary, everyday struggle for universal access to the free flows of information.

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[1] Fillipo Tommaso Marinetti, ‘Les mots en liberté futuristes’, *L’Age d’homme*,’, Paris 1987, p. 13ff.

[2] Ibid., pp. 40ff.

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CHAPTER 11

WikiLeaks: The Revolt of the Clerks, or Universality as Conspiracy

In our epoch we have become accustomed to protests and revolts in the name of particular identities and interests. The revolts in the name of universal projects, such as liberalism or communism, seem to belong to the past. But the activities of WikiLeaks serve no specific identities or interests. They, rather, have a general, universal goal: to guarantee the free flow of information. Thus, the phenomenon of WikiLeaks signals a reintroduction of universalism into politics. This fact alone makes the emergence of WikiLeaks highly significant. We know from history that only universalist projects can lead to real political change. But WikiLeaks signals not only a return of universalism but also the deep transformation that the notion of universalism has undergone during recent decades. WikiLeaks is not a political party. It does not offer any universalist vision of society, political programme or ideology designed to 'spiritually' or politically unify mankind. Rather, WikiLeaks offers a sum of technical means that would allow universal access to any specific, particular content. Universality of ideas is here replaced by universality of access. WikiLeaks offers not a universalist political project but a universal information service. The ethos of WikiLeaks is the ethos of civil, administrative service – globalized and universalized.

In his famous essay *La trahison des clercs* (1927), Julien Benda aptly described this ethos, along with a new universal class defined by this ethos. He called members of this class clerks. The word *clerk* is often translated as 'intellectual'. But in fact, the intellectual for Benda is a betrayer of the clerk's ethos, because the intellectual prefers the universality of his or her ideas to the duty of universal service. The true clerk is not committed to any particular worldview, not even the most universal one. The clerk, rather, serves others by helping them to realize their own particular ideas and goals. Benda saw the clerk primarily as a functionary, as an administrator in the framework of an enlightened, democratic state ruled by law. However, today the concept of the state has lost the aura of universality that it still had when Benda wrote his book. The state, even if it is internally organized in the most universalist way, remains a national institution. Its clerks, notwithstanding their universalist ethos, are necessarily embedded in the apparatuses of power that pursue particular national interests. This embedding is one of the reasons why the traditional clerk ethos, as described by Benda, became somewhat suspect.

However, I would argue that today we are witnessing a rebirth of the clerks and of the clerk ethos. Internet clerks have replaced the state clerks. The Internet was hailed originally as a chance to transcend and undermine the power of state bureaucracy. From the contemporary perspective, it is obvious that the Internet simply transferred the ethos and functions of the universal class from the state clerks to its own clerks. However, this transition did not go smoothly. And WikiLeaks is the best example of the problems that confront the new universalism in our contemporary world.

This new universalism sees its main political and cultural task as achieving universal representation of the multiple and heterogeneous cultural perspectives dictated by subjects' different cultural identities, gender and class determinations, and personal histories. Its project is not to exclude any of these perspectives from universal exposure. This seems to lead to a certain downgrading of the universal, because it signals a lack of faith in the possibility of universalist projects or ideas that would be open to the whole human race and could unify it. Seemingly, the new Internet universalism leaves humanity spiritually, ideologically, culturally and politically divided – even as it becomes informationally and technically united. But things are not so simple. The historically known universalist projects were born out of the traditional religious and philosophical desire to transcend individual perspectives and reach a universal perspective that would be open and relevant to everybody. It is the deep distrust of the possibility of such an act of transcendence that has discredited universalism during the twentieth century. However, it is still possible to reject one’s own particular perspective without transcending it, without opening any universalist perspective. The act of transcendence is replaced by an act of radical reduction. This reduction produces a subjectivity without any identity – or, rather, with zero-identity.

We tend to understand subjectivity as the bearer of a certain individual, original message, as the source of a unified worldview, as a producer of specific, personal, individual meanings. But there is the possibility of a subjectivity without any individual message or worldview – a neutral, anonymous subjectivity producing no original, individual meanings or opinions at all. In fact, such a subjectivity is not simply a theoretical possibility but an ever more present reality nowadays. It is a subjectivity of subjects who do not want to express their own ideas, or insights, or desires, but merely to create the possibility, the conditions for other subjectivities to express their ideas, opinions, worldviews and desires. I would call these subjects universal subjects: not because they transcend their particular viewpoints toward a universal viewpoint, but rather because they simply erase everything private, personal and particular through a peculiar act of self-reduction. They are neutral, anonymous subjects – not metasubjects of classical theology or metaphysics, but rather, so to speak, infrasubjects, populating the infrastructure of contemporary life.

They are clerks in Benda’s sense of the word, creating the universal infrastructural, networking, rhizomatic conditions that allow other people to satisfy their particular desires and realize their particular projects. The infrastructure of the Internet is today the privileged place for the current generation of clerks. They run companies like Microsoft, Google, Facebook, and Wikipedia. And WikiLeaks belongs in the same mould, because it does not aim to transmit its own message, but only the messages of others – even if it does mean to drag these messages ever further abroad, against the will of their producers. The subjectivity of the clerk cannot be deconstructed, because it does not construct any meanings. It is in itself a medium and not the message. It immunizes itself against any opinions or meanings that it perceives as signs of corruption. The clerks are all-inclusive because they are all-exclusive. They have pure service mentality and ethics. They may have their secrets, but these secrets are waiting to be revealed as new means of communication that will be again open to everybody. They build, indeed, something like a contemporary universal class that does not have any of its own ideas or goals, not even universal ideas or goals. Instead of expressing his or her own views, the clerk creates the conditions for the others to express theirs. This operation is in no way innocent, however.

Let us assume that the strategy of incorporating every existing worldview and cultural perspective into the global media networks of universal exposure has been successful. And there are some indications that it can be successful in the long run: The Internet and other contemporary means of communication offer – at least potentially – the possibility of avoiding censorship and exclusion and making everyone's particular message universally accessible. However, we are all well aware today of the fate to which any subjective message, particular viewpoint, or individual idea is necessarily subject once it is brought into circulation through the media of communication. We know already from Marshall McLuhan that the message of the medium undermines, subverts and shifts every individual message using this medium. We know from Heidegger that *die Sprache spricht* – the language says more than the individual using the language. These formulations undermine the subjectivity of the speaker, of the sender of the message, even if the hermeneutical subjectivity of the listener, reader, receiver of the information seems to be left relatively intact. However, Derridian deconstruction and Deleuzian machines of desire got rid of this last avatar of subjectivity. An individual reading of a text or interpretation of an image sinks into the infinite sea of interpretations and/or is carried away by the impersonal flows of desire. Mastery over communication is revealed by contemporary media theory as a subjective illusion. This incapacity of the subject to formulate, stabilize and communicate its message through the media is often characterized as the 'death of the subject'.

Thus, we are confronted with a somewhat paradoxical situation. On the one hand, in our epoch we believe in the necessity of including all subjects with all of their particular messages into the networks of universal exposure and communication. But, on the other hand, we know we cannot guarantee the unity and stability of these messages after this act of inclusion. The information flows dissolve, shift and subvert all the individual messages by turning them into more or less accidental aggregates of floating signifiers. Believing in the politics of inclusion, we no less strongly believe in the unavoidable death of the included subjects – together with their particular messages – through the same act of inclusion. Regarding the Internet as the leading medium of our time, we find ourselves confronted with a potentially anonymous mass of texts and images in which the origins of particular texts and images – together with the particular intentions of their authors – have been erased. The copy-and-paste operation that defines the functioning of the digital media turns any individual expression into an anonymous, impersonal ready-made that can be employed by any Internet user at any moment. The universal presents itself through the Internet as an impersonal sign flow. The subjectivities of the ‘content providers’ unavoidably drown in this flow. In this sense, the new universality – the universality of Internet clerks – creates a universal image after all. But this image is not a universal idea, project or commitment, but rather a universal event – the fact that the sign flow took this and not that form at a particular moment in time.

Julian Assange described eloquently this new, postmodern, posthistorical universalist vision in a recent interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist:

> There’s a universe of information, and we can imagine a sort of Platonic ideal in which we have an infinite horizon of information. It’s similar to the concept of the Tower of Babel. Imagine a field before us composed of all the information that exists in the world – inside government computers, people’s letters, things that have already been published, the stream of information coming out of televisions, this total knowledge of all the world, both accessible and inaccessible to the public. We can as a thought experiment observe this field and ask: If we want to use information to produce actions that affect the world to make it more just, which information will do that?[1]

This vision is especially striking because it is so un-Platonic and even anti-Platonic. Plato hoped to find his ‘Platonic’ ideas beyond the stream of information. And he tried to find these ideas in people’s thinking – not in what people had written or archived. He looked for something stable, permanent, able to withstand the flow of impressions and thoughts and at the same time immediately evident, radiant, beautiful. Now, Assange also assumes that information that does not move, that remains stable, is the most interesting. But his reasons for thinking so are very un-Platonic. In the same interview he says:

> Some of the information in this tremendous field, if you look at it carefully, is faintly glowing. And what it’s glowing with is the amount of work that’s being put into suppressing it … So, if you search for that signal of suppression, then you can find all this information that you should mark as information that should be released. So it was an epiphany to see the signal of censorship to always be an opportunity, to see that when organizations or governments of various kinds attempt to contain knowledge and suppress it, they are giving you the most important information you need to know: that there is something worth looking at to see if it should be exposed, and that censorship expresses weakness, not strength.[2]

In other words: the epiphany here is not a Platonic epiphany, not an ecstasy of evidence. It is, rather, a negative epiphany leading to a moral obligation to liberate information from its captivity and to let it flow. The concept of the information flow here is obviously the normative, regulatory, universal idea – even if it is a very un-Platonic one. At the same time, the criterion of universality remains obviously an aesthetic as well as ethical one. The censorship, the artificial interruption of the sign flow, is perceived as an attempt to distort the sublime vision of the universal landscape of knowledge. Particular interests tried to damage this vision after they were recognized as irrelevant and obsolete.

And, indeed, the particular subjectivities that were already theoretically deconstructed and practically disappropriated through the Internet become reconstructed artificially as owners of a ‘private sphere’ – an area of private access that is supposed to remain hidden from others. In our media-driven, postdeconstructive age, the dead subject became a secret. The individual is defined today by the pass codes and passwords that delineate his or her area of access. This area of access is assumed at the same time to be protected and concealed from others. Thus the area of access replaces today the unity of the individual message, the personal, authorial intention, the subjective act of thinking and feeling. Technical protection replaces metaphysical certainty. For a very long time, subjectivity was understood as being metaphysically inaccessible – as something that can be interpreted but not directly experienced. Today we do not believe any longer in this metaphysical place of subjectivity. Thus, hermeneutics has been replaced by hacking. The hacker overcomes the borders of an individual subjectivity that is understood as an area of privileged access, discovers its secret and appropriates its message – instead of interpreting it – and then releases this message and lets the media networks dissolve it.

In this sense the activity of WikiLeaks is a practical continuation of Derridian deconstruction. It is a practice that liberates the signs that are captured and controlled by subjectivity. The difference is only this: In the case of the Internet, we have to do not with metaphysical but with purely technical control over the signs. Accordingly, hacking is used instead of philosophical critique. Hacking is often criticized as an intrusion into the private sphere, but in fact, the telos of all contemporary media is the complete abolition of the private sphere. The traditional media practice nothing else when they hunt down celebrities to reveal their personal lives. In a certain sense, WikiLeaks does the same in the framework of the Internet. Not accidentally, it cooperates with the international press – the *New York Times, Der Spiegel*, etc. The abolition and confiscation of the private sphere (but not of private property!) is what unites WikiLeaks with traditional media. WikiLeaks can be seen as a vanguard of the media. It is not a rebellion against it. Rather, WikiLeaks moves more audaciously and faster in the direction of the common telos of contemporary media, by realizing the goal of the universal class, of the new universalization of the world through the means of universal service.

But here another question arises: In what respect and to what degree is this universal service inscribed into the contemporary market economy, into the contemporary global flow of capital that also pretends to be a neutral, nonideological and universally accessible means for achieving private goals and satisfying private desires? It is obvious that the corporations operating the different aspects of the Internet are totally inscribed in global capitalist markets. But what to say about WikiLeaks? Its attacks are directed more against state censorship than against the flow of capital. One can formulate the following hypothesis concerning the attitude of WikiLeaks toward capitalism: For WikiLeaks, capital is not universal enough because it is ultimately dependent on the patronage of nation states and relies on their political, military and industrial power. That is the reason why the mainstream Internet corporations collaborate with state censorship and block the free flow of information through different means of protection. As a rule, we think of capitalism as a power that corrupts the state – the democratic, universalist nation state. But WikiLeaks indirectly reverses this accusation. And, indeed, one can see the situation from another perspective: Capitalism does not fulfil its global promise because it has been permanently corrupted by the nation states and their security interests. Here, WikiLeaks offers the perspective of a universal service that exceeds the universality of capitalism – that is more radically global than the global markets.

As we have said, the practice of WikiLeaks is often discussed and criticized for invasion and breach of privacy. But, in fact, this practice does not so much affect the privacy of individuals. Certainly Assange, along with many others from the Internet crowd, does not believe in copyright or, in general, the right of individuals to block the flow of information. But his activity is mostly directed against what we might call state privacy – because state censorship seems to contradict the promise of universality that was and is still given by the modern state. In this sense, the breach of state privacy means simply the restoration of the original goal of the state, and gives the state a chance to progress towards a greater universality.

Thus one can say that WikiLeaks is an expression of the revolt of the clerks against the betrayal of their ethos, of their universal vocation, by the nation states. In WikiLeaks' view, this betrayal is caused by the inability of existing state apparatuses to become truly universal by redefining their national interests in a universal perspective. But now the question arises: Is radical, uncompromising universality possible at all? The answer is yes, but under one condition: The universal has to become isolated, protected from the world of particularities that is constantly corrupting it.

And, indeed, to remain truly universalist, any universal project should be protected from corruption, that is, from the private, particular interests that could undermine its universality. But if a universal project has been designed as open and publicly accessible, it necessarily becomes corrupted, because the realization of this project unavoidably involves compromises with existing institutions and private interests. The only way to avoid corruption, to conserve the universality of a universal project and keep its realization intact, is to separate this project from the outside world as radically as possible – to make the project publicly inaccessible. Or, in other words, universality can function in our world of particularities only in the form of conspiracy and only under the conditions of perfect inaccessibility, nontransparency and obscurity. Otherwise, it will be immediately betrayed and corrupted.

The conspiratorial dimension of universality is historically well known. The politics of conspiracy is characteristic of all religious sects and revolutionary groups bearing a universal claim. And this conspiratorial politics has been criticized time and again in the name of openness, democracy and universal public access. These critics saw the reason for their rigorous politics of conspiracy and exclusion primarily in the narrow and exclusive character of the ideologies that individual religious sects or revolutionary groups have professed. Or, in other words, the critics saw this reason in their commitment to the notion of universal truth. Every truth that was professed by these sects and groups claimed to be universal – but at the same time it remained particular because it was defined from the beginning in opposition to other truths making the same universal claim. This paradox of universal truth was made responsible for ideologically motivated conspiracies and the politics of exclusion. Accordingly, the remedy was taken to be rejection of the notion of universal truth as such. Universal truth was replaced with a plurality of identities and perspectives that supposedly would not lead to any radical conflict, because none of these identities and perspectives made the universal claim that could provoke a real conflict between them. It is the political reason behind the replacement of the universal idea, or universal truth, by universal access and universal service.

But now the practice of WikiLeaks demonstrates that universal access, too, can only be provided in the form of universal conspiracy. In the same interview, Assange says,

> It was not just the intellectual challenge of making and breaking these cryptographic codes and connecting people together in novel ways. Rather, our will came from a quite extraordinary notion of power, which was that with some clever mathematics you can, very simply – and this seems complex in abstraction but simple in terms of what computers are capable of – enable any individual to say no to the most powerful state. So if you and I agree on a particular encryption code, and it is mathematically strong, then the forces of every superpower brought to bear on that code still cannot crack it. So a state can desire to do something to an individual, yet it is simply not possible for the state to do it – and in this sense, mathematics and individuals are stronger than superpowers.

Later, Assange describes the possibility of a name for a URL that can protect its content far more effectively than conventional copyright regulations.

In other words, universal public access is possible only when the means that guarantee this accessibility are themselves completely inaccessible. Transparency is based on radical nontransparency. Universal openness is based on the most perfect closure. WikiLeaks is a first example of a truly postmodern universal conspiracy. It operates beyond any claim to truth, universal or particular. At the same time, it demonstrates that universal access is possible only as universal conspiracy. Not accidentally, Assange refers over and over in his writings and interviews to Solzhenitsyn as the main source of his inspiration. And indeed, everything Solzhenitsyn did can be described as a clever combination of conspiracy and publicity. Like many other Soviet dissidents, he discovered that the international press was a source of power comparable with the power of the Soviet state. And like other Soviet dissidents – at least during the Soviet epoch – he did not profess any ideology. He simply wanted to offer a testimony. He wanted to provide access to what was hidden. But to be able do so, he, like other dissidents, had to be highly conspiratorial.

Now the trajectory of WikiLeaks becomes understandable: It interprets and embodies universal service as conspiracy – and conspiracy as universal service. And this understanding puts WikiLeaks itself, as well as its members, at risk. Already in the 1930s Alexandre Kojève had proclaimed in his famous lectures on Hegel that the history of universal visions was over, that the human being had ceased to be a subject of truth and had become a sophisticated animal with particular interests and desires. For Kojève, that meant that the posthistorical mode of existence excluded the possibility of substantial risk, because such a possibility arises only as a result of a subject's commitment to a universal truth. Thus for Kojève the only way to remain a philosopher after the end of history was to enter universal service in the form of the European Commission. Kojève understood the path of universal service and administration as a secure one. WikiLeaks and Assange himself have proved that the path of universal service can also involve taking a substantial risk. They became dissidents of universal service, and so invented a new form of risk. Or rather, they thematized this risk and made it explicit by committing themselves to universal service and administration as a form of conspiracy from the very beginning. It is a true historical innovation. And it is to be expected that this innovation will have interesting consequences.

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[1] 'In Conversation with Julian Assange Part I', WikiLeaks.org, 23 May 2011.

[2] Ibid.

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CHAPTER 12

Art on the Internet

In recent decades the Internet has become the primary place for the production and distribution of writing, including literature; artistic practices; and, more generally, cultural archives.

Obviously, many cultural workers experience this shift towards the Internet as liberating, because the Internet is not selective – or at least it is much less selective than the museum or traditional publishing house. Indeed, the question that troubled artists and writers of past epochs was ‘What are the criteria of choice? Why do some artworks get into the museum while other artworks do not? Why do some texts get published – and not others?’ We know the catholic (so to speak) theories of selection according to which artworks do or do not deserve to be chosen by the museum or the publishing house: A work should be good, beautiful, inspiring, original, creative, powerful, expressive, historically relevant – one can cite hundreds of similar criteria. However, these theories collapsed because nobody could persuasively explain why one artwork is more beautiful, original, etc. than the rest. Or why a particular text is better written than any other text. So other theories succeeded that were more protestant, even Calvinist. According to these theories, artworks are chosen because they are chosen. The concept of divine power that is perfectly sovereign and does not need any legitimation was transferred to the museum and other traditional cultural institutions. This protestant theory of choice that stresses the unconditional power of the chooser is a precondition for the institutional critique – and the museums and other cultural institutions were in fact criticized for the way they used and abused their alleged power.

This kind of institutional critique does not make much sense in the case of the Internet. Of course, political censorship of the Internet is practiced by some states, but that is a different story. However, here another question arises: What happens to art and literary writing as a result of their emigration from the traditional cultural institutions towards the Internet?

Historically, literature and art were considered fields of fiction. Now I would argue that the use of the Internet as the main medium of production and distribution of art and literature leads to their defictionalization. The traditional institutions – the museum, the theatre, the book – presented fiction as fiction by means of self-dissimulation. Sitting in a theatre, the spectator was supposed to reach a state of self-oblivion – to forget everything about the space he or she was sitting in. Only then was he or she able to spiritually leave everyday reality and become immersed in the fictional world presented onstage. The reader had to forget that the book is a material object like every other object in order to truly follow and enjoy the literary narrative. The art museum visitor had to forget the art museum to become spiritually absorbed in the contemplation of art. In other words, the precondition for the functioning of fiction as fiction is the dissimulation of the material, technological, institutional framing that makes this functioning possible.

Now, at least since the beginning of the twentieth century, the art of the historical avant-garde tried to thematize and to reveal the factual, material, nonfictional dimension of art. It did so by thematizing the institutional and technological framing of art – by acting against this framing and thus making it visible, experienceable by the viewer, reader, visitor. Bertolt Brecht tried to destroy the theatrical illusion. The futurist and constructivist art movements have compared artists to industrial workers, to engineers who produce real things – even if these things can be interpreted as referring to a fiction. The same can be said about writing. At least since Mallarmé, Marinetti and Zdanevich, the production of texts has been understood as a production of things. Heidegger understood art precisely as a struggle against the fictional. In his late writings, he speaks of technological and institutional framing (*das Gestell*) as being hidden behind the image of the world (*Weltbild*). The subject who contemplates the image of the world in an allegedly sovereign manner necessarily overlooks the framing of this image. Science cannot reveal this framing, either, because science depends on it. Heidegger believed, therefore, that only art could reveal the hidden *Gestell* and demonstrate the fictional, illusionary character of our images of the world. Here Heidegger obviously had in mind avant-garde art. However, the avant-garde has never fully succeeded in the quest for the real, because the reality of art, its material side that the avant-garde tried to reveal, were refictionalized by being put under the standard conditions of art representation.

That is precisely what the Internet changed, and in a quite radical manner. The Internet functions under the presupposition of its nonfictional character, of its having a reference point in offline reality. The Internet is a medium of information – but information is always information about something. And this something is always placed outside the Internet – that is, off line. Otherwise, all the economic transactions on the Internet would become impossible, and so would military and security surveillance operations. Of course, fiction can be created on the Internet – for example, a fictional user. However, in that case, the fiction becomes a fraud that can be – and even must be – revealed.

But most importantly, on the Internet art and literature do not get a fixed, institutional framing, as they did in the analogue-dominated world. Here the factory, there the theatre; here the stock market, there the museum. On the Internet, art and literature operate in the same space as military planning, tourist business, capital flows, and so on; Google shows, among other things, that there are no walls in the space of the Internet. Of course, there are specialized Web sites or blogs for art. But to address them the user must click on them, and so frame them on the surface of his or her computer, or iPad, or mobile phone. Thus, framing becomes deinstitutionalized, and the framed fictionality becomes de-fictionalized. The user cannot ignore the frame, because he or she created it. The framing – and operation of framing – become explicit and remain explicit throughout the experience of contemplating and writing. Here, the dissimulation of the frame that defined our experience of the fictional for centuries reaches its end. Art and literature can still refer to fiction and not to reality. However, we, as users, do not immerse ourselves in this fiction, do not, like Alice, go through the looking glass; instead, we perceive art production as a real process, and the artwork as a real thing. One can say that on the Internet there is no art or literature, but only information about art and literature, alongside other information about other fields of human activity. For example, the literary texts or artworks by a particular writer or artist can be found on the Internet when I Google the person's name, and they are shown to me in the context of all the other information that I find about that person: biography, other works, political activities, critical reviews, personal details. An author's 'fictional' text becomes integrated into the information about the author as a real person. Through the Internet, the avant-garde impulse that has driven art and writing since the beginning of the twentieth century finds its realization, its telos. Art is presented on the Internet as a specific kind of reality: as a working process, or even life process, taking place in the real, offline world. This does not mean that aesthetic criteria do not play any role in the presentation of data on the Internet. However, in this case we are dealing not with art but with data design – with the aesthetic presentation of documentation about real art events and not with the production of fiction.

The word *documentation* is crucial here. In recent decades, art documentation was increasingly included in art exhibitions and art museums alongside the traditional artworks. But this proximity always seemed highly problematic. The artworks are art; they immediately demonstrate themselves as art – to be admired, emotionally experienced, etc. The artworks are also fictional – they cannot be used in a court as evidence, they do not guarantee the truth of what they represent. But art documentation is not fictional: It refers to an art event, or exhibition, or installation, or project that we assume has really taken place. Art documentation refers to art but it is not art. That is why art documentation can be reformatted, rewritten, extended, shortened, and so on. We can subject art documentation to all of these operations that we are forbidden to use with an artwork because they would change that artwork’s form. And the form of the artwork is institutionally guaranteed, because only the form guarantees the reproducibility and identity of the fiction that this artwork is. By contrast, documentation can be changed at will, because its identity and reproducibility are guaranteed by the form of its ‘real’, external referent and not by its own form. But even if the emergence of art documentation preceded the emergence of the Internet as an art medium, only the introduction of the Internet has given to art documentation its legitimate place.

Meanwhile, the cultural institutions themselves began to use the Internet as a primary space for their self-representation. The museums put their collections on display on the Internet. And, of course, virtual depositories of art images are much more compact and much cheaper to maintain than traditional art museums. Thus, the museums are able to present the parts of their collections that are usually kept in storage. The same can be said about the publishing houses that permanently expand the e-component of their publication programmes. And the same can be said about the Web sites of individual artists – one can find there the fullest representation of what they are doing. It is what artists mostly show to a visitor to their studios nowadays – if one comes to a studio to see a particular artist’s work, this artist usually puts a laptop on the table and shows documentation of his or her activities, including not only the production of the artworks but also the artist’s participation in long-term projects, temporary installations, urban interventions, political actions, etc. The Internet allows the author to make his or her art accessible to almost everyone around the world and at the same time to create a personal archive of it.

Thus, the Internet leads to the globalization of the author, of the person of the author. Here I mean again not the fictional, authorial subject allegedly investing the artwork with his intentions and meanings, to be hermeneutically deciphered and revealed. This authorial subject has already been deconstructed and proclaimed dead many times. I mean the real person, the one who exists in the offline reality to which the Internet data refers. This author uses the Internet not only to write novels or produce artworks but also to buy tickets, make restaurant reservations, conduct business. All of these activities take place in the same integrated space, and all of them are potentially accessible to other Internet users.

Of course, authors and artists, like other individuals and like organizations, try to escape this total visibility by creating sophisticated systems of passwords and data protection. Today, subjectivity has become a technical construction: The contemporary subject is defined as the owner of a set of passwords that he or she knows and other people do not know. The contemporary subject is primarily a keeper of secrets. In a certain way it is a very traditional definition of the human subject, which was always described as knowing something about itself that maybe only God knew but other people could not, being ontologically prevented from reading others' thoughts. However, today we have to do not with ontologically but rather technically protected secrets. The Internet is a space in which the subject is originally constituted as something transparent, observable – only afterwards does he or she take steps to be technically protected, to conceal the originally revealed secret. Moreover, every technical protection can be breached. Today, the *hermeneutiker* is a hacker. The contemporary Internet is place of cyberwars in which the secret is the prize. To know the secret means to gain control of the subject that is constituted by this secret; thus the cyberwars are wars of subjectivation and desubjectivation. But these wars can take place only because the Internet is originally a place of transparency and referentiality.

Nevertheless, the so-called content providers often complain that their artistic production drowns in the sea of data that circulates through the Internet and, thus, remain invisible. Indeed, the Internet also functions as a huge rubbish tip in which everything disappears rather than emerges – most Internet productions (and personae) never get the degree of public attention that their authors hoped to achieve. Ultimately, everyone searches the Internet for information about what has happened to one's own friends and acquaintances. One follows certain blogs, information sites, e-magazines, Web sites – and ignores everything else. So the standard trajectory of a contemporary author is not from the local to the global, but from the global to the local. Traditionally, the reputation of an author – be it writer or artist – moved from local to global. One had to become known locally first to be able to establish oneself globally later. Today, one starts with self-globalization. To put one's own texts or artwork on the Internet means to directly address the global audience – avoiding any local mediation. Here, the personal becomes global and the global becomes personal. At the same time, the Internet offers a means of quantifying the global success of an author, because the Internet is a huge machine for equalizing both readers and readings. It quantifies success according to the rule One click, one reading (or viewing). However, to be able to survive in the contemporary culture one also has to draw the attention of the local, offline audience to one's global exposure – to become not only globally present but also locally familiar.

Here a more general question arises: Who is the reader, or who is the spectator of the Internet itself? It cannot be a human being, because a human being's gaze does not have the capacity to grasp the whole of the Internet. But it also must not be God, because the divine gaze is infinite – and the Internet is finite. Often enough we think about the Internet in terms of infinite data flows that transcend the limits of individual control. But in fact, the Internet is not a place of data flows, it is a machine for stopping and reversing data flows. The medium of the Internet is electricity, and the supply of electricity is finite. Therefore, the Internet cannot support infinite data flows. The Internet runs on a finite number of cables, terminals, computers, mobile phones, and other equipment units. The efficiency of the Internet is based precisely on its finiteness and, therefore, on its observability. Search engines such as Google demonstrate this. Nowadays, one hears a lot about the growing degree of surveillance – especially through the Internet. But surveillance is not something external to the Internet, or some specific technical use of the Internet. The Internet is by its essence a machine of surveillance. It divides the flow of data into small, traceable and reversible operations, and thus exposes every user to its surveillance – real or possible. The gaze that reads the Internet is the algorithmic gaze. And, at least potentially, this algorithmic gaze can see and read everything that has ever been put on the Internet.

Now what does this original transparency mean for the artists? It seems to me that the real problem is not the Internet as place of distribution and exhibition of art but the Internet as working space. Under the traditional, institutional regime art was produced in one place –the atelier of an artist or the room of a writer – and shown in another place, in a museum or gallery, or in a published book. The emergence of the Internet erased this difference between the production and exhibition of art. The process of art production as far as it involves the use of the Internet is already exposed from beginning to end. Earlier, only industrial workers operated under the gaze of others, under the permanent control that was so eloquently described by Michel Foucault. Writers or artists worked in seclusion – beyond that panoptic, public control. However, if the so-called creative worker uses the Internet, he or she is subjected to the same or an even greater degree of surveillance as the Foucauldian worker.

The results of surveillance are sold by the corporations that control the Internet because they own the means of production, the material and technical basis of the Internet. One should not forget that the Internet is owned privately. And the owners' profits come mostly from targeted advertisement. Here we have an interesting phenomenon: the monetization of hermeneutics. Classical hermeneutics, which searched for the author behind the work, was criticized by the theoreticians of Structuralism, Close Reading, etc., who thought that it made no sense to chase ontological secrets that are inaccessible by definition. Today this old, traditional hermeneutics has been reborn as a means of the additional economic exploitation of the subjects who operate in the Internet, The surplus value that such a subject produces and that is appropriated by the Internet corporations is the hermeneutic value: the subject not only does or produces something on the Internet but also reveals himself or herself as a human being with certain interests, desires and needs. The monetization of classical hermeneutics is one of the most interesting processes to confront us in the course of the past few decades.

Now, at first glance it seems that for the artists this permanent exposure is more positive than negative. The resynchronization of art production and art exposure through the Internet seems to make things better, not worse. Indeed, this resynchronization means that the artist does not need to produce any final product, any finished artwork; the documentation of the process of art making is already an artwork. Balzac’s artist who never could present his masterpiece would have had no problem under these new conditions: The documentation of his efforts to create a masterpiece would be his masterpiece. Thus, the Internet functions more like the church than like the museum. Nietzsche wrote that with the death of God, we lost the spectator. The emergence of the Internet has given us the return of the universal spectator. So it seems that we are back in paradise and, like saints, we do the immaterial work of pure existence under the divine gaze. In fact, the life of a saint can be described as a blog that is read by God and remains uninterrupted even by the saint’s death. So why do we need any secrets anymore? Why would we reject radical transparency? The answer to these questions depends on the answer to a more fundamental question: Has the Internet effected the return of God or reintroduced the *malin genie* with its evil eye?

I would suggest that the Internet is not paradise, but rather hell, or, if you like, paradise and hell at the same time. Jean-Paul Sartre said that hell is other people – that is, life under the gaze of others. He argued that the gaze of the others ‘objectifies’ us, and thereby negates the possibility of change that defines our subjectivity. Sartre defined human subjectivity as a ‘project’ directed towards the future – and, thus, as an ontologically guaranteed secret, because it can never be revealed in the ‘here and now’, but only in the future. In other words, Sartre understood human subjects as struggling against the identity that had been given to them by society. That explains why he interpreted the gaze of others as hell: In the gaze of the other, we see that we have lost the battle and have remained prisoners of our socially codified identity.

Thus, we try to avoid the gaze of the other for a while, in order to be able to reveal our ‘true self’ after a certain period of seclusion – to reappear in the public in a new shape, in a new form. This state of temporary absence helps us to carry out what we call the creative process – in fact, it is itself what we call the creative process. André Breton tells a story about a French poet who, when he wanted to sleep, put on his door a sign reading ‘Please, be quiet – the poet is working’. This anecdote summarizes the traditional understanding of creative work: Creative work is creative because it takes place beyond public control – and even beyond the conscious control of the author. This period of absence could last days, months, years, even a lifetime. Only at the end of it, the author was expected to present a work (if not presented in his lifetime, it should be found posthumously among his effects) that would be then accepted as creative precisely because it seemed to have emerged almost out of nothingness. In other words, the creative work is the work that presupposes the desynchronization of the labour of creation from the exposure of its result, the created thing. Creative work is practiced in a parallel time of seclusion, in secrecy, so there is an effect of surprise when the creator’s time gets resynchronized with the time of the audience. That is why the art practitioner traditionally wanted to be concealed, to become invisible. The reason is not that artists have committed crimes or concealed dirty secrets that they want to keep from the gaze of others. The gaze of others is experienced by us as an evil eye not when it wants to penetrate our secrets and make them transparent (such a penetrating gaze is rather flattering and exciting), but when it denies that we have any secrets, when it reduces us to what it sees and registers.

Artistic practice is often understood as being individual and personal. But what does individual or personal mean? The individual subject is usually understood as being different from others. However, here the point is not so much one’s difference from others but one’s difference from oneself – one’s refusal to be identified according to the general criteria of identification. Indeed, the parameters that define our socially codified, nominal identity are completely foreign to us. We did not choose our names, we were not consciously present at the date and place of our birth, most of us did not found or name the city or street where we live, we did not choose our parents, our ethnicity, our nationality. All of these external parameters of our existence have no meaning for us – they do not correlate to any subjective evidence. They indicate how others see us, but they are completely irrelevant to our inner, subjective life.

Modern artists practiced a revolt against the identities that were imposed on them by others – by society, the state, their school, their parents. – for the right to sovereign self-identification. Modern art was a search for the 'true self'. And the question is not whether the true self is real or merely a metaphysical fiction. The question of identity is not a question of truth but a question of power: Who has the power over my own identity – society or I? And, more generally: Who has the control, the sovereignty over the social taxonomy, the social mechanisms of identification – the state institutions or I? That means that the struggle against my public persona and nominal identity in the name of my sovereign persona, or sovereign identity, has also a public, political dimension, because it is directed against the dominating mechanisms of identification – the dominant social taxonomy, with all its divisions and hierarchies. That is why modern artists always said, Do not look at me. Look at what I am doing; that is my true self. Or maybe it is no self at all, an absence of my self. Later artists mostly gave up the search for the hidden, true self. Instead, they began to use their nominal identities as ready-mades, and to organize complicated games with them. But this strategy still presupposes a disidentification from a nominal, socially codified identity, in the form of artistic reappropriation, transformation and manipulation. Modernity was the time of desire for utopia. Utopian expectation is the hope that one's project of discovering or constructing the true self will be successful, and socially recognized. In other words, the individual project of seeking the true self acquires a political dimension. The artistic project becomes a revolutionary project that aims at the total transformation of society through the obliteration of taxonomies that define the functioning of this society.

The relationship of traditional cultural institutions to this Utopian desire is ambiguous. On the one hand, these institutions offer artists and writers a chance to transcend their own time, with all its taxonomies and nominal identities. The museums and other cultural archives promise to carry the artist's work into the future. However, these archives betray their promise at the moment of fulfilling it. The artist's work is carried into the future – but the nominal identity of the artist is reimposed on his or her work. In the museum catalogue we read again the name, date and place of birth, nationality – the taxonomic markers the artist sought to escape. That is why modern art aimed to destroy the museums and begin to circulate beyond borders and control.

Now, during so-called postmodernity, the search for the true self and, accordingly, the true society in which this true self could be revealed was proclaimed to be obsolete. Therefore we tend to speak of postmodernity as a post-utopian time. But it is not quite true. Postmodernity did not give up the struggle against the subject's nominal identity – in fact, it even radicalized this struggle. Postmodernity had its own utopia, the utopia of self-dissolution of the subject into infinite, anonymous flows of energy, desire, or play of signifiers. Instead of abolishing the nominal, social self by discovering the true self through the production of art, postmodern art theory invested its hopes in the complete loss of identity through the process of reproduction: a different strategy pursuing the same goal. The postmodern utopian euphoria provoked by the notion of reproduction is well illustrated by the following passage from *On the Museum's Ruins*, published in 1993 by Douglas Crimp. In this well-known book, Crimp claimed with reference to Walter Benjamin:

> Through reproductive technology, postmodernist art dispenses with the aura. The fiction of the creating subject gives way to the frank confiscation, quotation, excerption, accumulation and repetition of already existing images. Notions of originality, authenticity and presence, essential to the ordered discourse of the museum, are undermined.[1]

The flow of reproductions overflows the museum – and individual identity drowns in this flow. The Internet became for some time the screen onto which these postmodern utopian dreams were projected – dreams about the dissolution of all identities in the infinite play of signifiers. The globalized rhizome took the place of communist mankind.

However, the Internet has become not a place of realization but rather a graveyard for postmodern utopias – just as the museum became a graveyard for modern utopias.

On the Internet, every free-floating signifier gets an address. Moreover, every Internet image or text not only has its specific unique place but also its unique time of appearance.

The Internet registers every moment when a certain piece of data is clicked on, liked, disliked, transferred or transformed. Accordingly, a digital image can never be merely copied (as an analogue, mechanically reproducible image can), but is always newly staged or performed. And every performance of a data file is dated and archived. Further: Every act of seeing an image or reading a text on the Internet is registered and becomes traceable. In offline reality, the act of contemplation leaves no trace – it is, actually, an empirical correlation to the traditional ontological construction of the subject as not belonging to the material world, not being a part of it. But on the Internet, an act of contemplation does leave traces. And that is the last blow that finally destroys the ontological autonomy of the subject. User or content provider – in the context of the Internet the human being acts and is perceived as an empirical person and not as an 'immaterial' subject.

Of course, we are discussing the Internet as we know it. But I expect that the present state of the Internet will be radically changed by the impending cyberwars. These wars have already been announced, and they will destroy or at least seriously damage the Internet as a means of communication and as the dominant marketplace. The contemporary world looks very much like the nineteenth-century world – a world defined by the politics of open markets, growing capitalism, celebrity culture, the return of religion, terrorism, and counterterrorism. World War I destroyed this world and made the politics of open markets impossible. By its end, the geopolitical, military interests of the individual nation states had been revealed as much more powerful than those states' economic interests. A long period of wars and revolutions followed. Let us see what is waiting for us in the near future.

But I would like to close this final chapter with a more general consideration of the relationship between the archive and utopia. As I tried to show, the utopian impulse has always to do with the desire of the subject to break out of its own historically defined identity, to leave its place in the historical taxonomy. In a certain way, the archive gives the subject the hope of surviving his or her own contemporaneity and of revealing a true self in the future, because the archive promises to sustain and make accessible the subject's texts or artworks after death. The archive's utopian or – to use Foucault's term – heterotopian promise is crucial, because it allows the subject to develop a distance from and critical attitude towards his or her own time and immediate audience.

Archives are often interpreted as merely a means of conserving the past – of displaying the past in the present time. But in fact archives are at the same time and even primarily machines for transporting the present into the future. Artists do their work not only for their own time but also for the art archives – that is, for the future in which the artist's work will remain present. That produces a difference between politics and art. Artists and politicians share the common here and now of the public space, and they both want to shape the future – that is what unites art and politics. But politics and art shape the future in two different ways. Politics understands the future as a result of its actions, which take place here and now. Political action has to be efficient, to bring results, to transform social life. In other words, political practice shapes the future – but it disappears in and through this future; it becomes totally absorbed by its own results and consequences. The goal of present politics is to become obsolete – and to give place to a politics of the future.

But artists work not only inside the public space of their time but also for the heterogeneous space of the art archives, where their works will have a place among the works of both past and future. Art, as it functioned in modernity and still functions in our time, does not disappear after its work is done. Rather, the artwork remains present in the future. And it is precisely this anticipated future presence of art that guarantees its influence on the future, its chance to shape the future. Politics shapes the future by its disappearance. Art shapes the future by its prolonged presence. That creates a gap between art and politics – a gap that has been demonstrated often enough throughout the tragic history of the relationship between left-wing art and left-wing politics in the twentieth century.

To be sure, our archives are structured historically. And our use of these archives is still defined by the nineteenth century's tradition of historicism. Thus, we tend to posthumously reinscribe artists into the historical contexts from which they strove to escape. In this sense, the art collections that preceded the historicism of the nineteenth century – the collections that wanted to be collections of examples of pure beauty, for example – look naïve only at first glance. In fact, they are more faithful to the original utopian impulse than their more sophisticated historicist counterparts. Now, it seems to me that today we are coming to be more and more interested in the nonhistoricist approach to our past. More interested in the decontextualization and re-enactment of individual phenomena from the past than in their historical recontextualization. More interested in the utopian aspirations that lead artists out of their historical contexts than in those contexts themselves. Maybe the most interesting aspect of the Internet as archive is precisely the possibility of decontextualization and recontextualization through the cut-and-paste operations that the Internet offers to its users. And it seems to me that this is a positive development, because it strengthens the archive's utopian potential and weakens its potential for betraying the utopian promise – a potential that is inherent in any archive, in whatever way it is structured.

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[1] Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1993, p. 58.

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